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**Parting the veils of silence: a woman's quest for meaning through
the life transition of menopause**

Rashon A. Chowdhury

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in accordance with the requirements for award of
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Abstract

This dissertation chronicles my quest for meaning through the life transition of menopause. In my British culture, menopause is medicalised and attention is not paid to the psychological issues that this great rite of passage can bring (Chrisler, 2013, 2011, 2006; Herzig, 2012; Nosek Kennedy, & Gudmundsdottir; 2012). The complexities that some women (including myself) face during menopause are examined, together with the affordances and constraints of doing personal research. As an integrative transpersonal psychotherapist trained in different modalities that also includes holding a spiritual perspective, I often see women as clients who have difficulties navigating their transitions. The issues they present are not just physical; menopause also brings psychological challenges to be addressed and often a search for deeper meaning.

The importance of other cultural attitudes to menopause are discussed, where it is seen as a positive time in a woman's life, honouring her life experience and wisdom (Alleger, 2004; Boice, 2007; Shinoda Bolen, 2015). In search of a deeper engagement with the transition on a psychological and spiritual level I engaged in two shamanic retreats based on Native American Indian traditions, a Sufi silent alchemical retreat, an advanced diploma in psychotherapy and a solitary retreat into woodland.

Autoethnography provided me with a vehicle with which to document my journey through the research so that the various positions I travelled through in my experiences could be honoured (Ellis, 2004; Sparkes, 2002). Writing as inquiry provided a means to experiment with the production of texts which encapsulated my own and different views and perspectives on menopause (Richardson, 2005; St. Pierre, 2005).

Key themes that emerged from the research were: issues with negative self-identity; loss and grief; different cultural spiritual lenses; the need for radical self-care; the transformation of self through examination of archetypes and symbols; the significance of celebrating menopause through ritual and ceremony; and the value of being in groups which brought support and the means to share experiences.

The research highlights the importance of attending to women's psychological and spiritual needs during menopause. This study is my contribution to the field of psychotherapy and counselling, to enable myself and other professionals to view this important transition in a different way and part the veils of silence which surround it in my culture.

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Finally, my mother, father and all my ancestors who have passed. Your wisdom is with me every day.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic awards. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed.....Date.....

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Prologue

Conversation with a Nurse

I have burnt the top of my hand quite badly and need to have it dressed by a nurse.

Nurse: Hello Mrs Chowdhury.

Me: Hello, thank you for seeing me. By the way it's not 'Mrs'.

Nurse: So what can I do for you today?

Me: I've hurt myself. I don't know what was going on, but I burnt myself.

Nurse: I can see it is deep and obviously painful. So what happened?

Me: I went to take a dish out of the oven and accidentally burnt my poor hand in the process. I'm so angry with myself, I don't know what was going on – I was spaced out, just not aware of what I was doing. Actually, I've been like this since I started menopause.

The nurse grimaces.

Nurse: Huh, it's a nightmare isn't it? I get distracted myself sometimes and I don't seem to have the patience I once had with people. And you know what? Everything has gone south! You know what I mean? People used to tell me I had a lovely figure – and now it's gone to pot!

Me: Yeah, it's all gone down there for me too, and one minute I feel great and then for no reason, I get really down.

Nurse: They don't know do they, the doctors and that, what it's about? They just say "take this pill and you'll be back to normal", but I don't know.... I just don't know...

The nurse tenderly starts to dress my wound.

Me: There's got to be more to it surely? It doesn't feel like it's just hormonal and physical – there has to be more to it than just not being able to have kids and getting older – right?

Nurse: Yeah, I get you – it's much more than that – I feel like a teenager sometimes. I've even thought I might get a tattoo – you know? There's something rebellious inside and I don't know what to do with it. I'm all over the place sometimes. And, it's hard to get good advice about what's really happening.

Me: I totally hear what you're saying. I feel like I'm changing inside and it's huge – but I don't know how to navigate it. I feel lost at sea – in emotional turbulence for most of the time. And yet, I know there is something more – a bigger picture. Don't laugh, but it almost feels 'spiritual'.

Nurse: Yes, spiritual – that's it, that's the one, yeah. It's bigger than just me. Yeah I like that, spiritual, not that I'm religious or anything, but I am searching for something – do you know what I mean? But where do you look? No-one tells you anything.

Me: So am I. You know, I hope I find what that is for me, as I'm doing research into the menopausal transition and the journey I take with it.

Nurse: That sounds really interesting. Keep in touch, I'd love to know more about it. I don't really know people who want to talk to me about what's going on. My daughters aren't interested, and I say to them, "you wait love, your time will come and then you'll know how difficult it is. You're not going to like it. You'll have a weak bladder and have to wear pads like nappies and be helpless when you laugh and wet yourself, and hot flushes, guaranteed to start as soon as you get into bed"! My girl friends who are going through the same thing don't want to talk about it. I think they think it'll just go away if they don't think about it – you know? My husband, he doesn't know what to do with me sometimes and tells me to just get on with it. Hah! Do you know something? Sometimes, I think he's scared of me. Yeah, really scared, like when I question him on stuff, he gets really defensive. I think he thinks that this menopause change makes me dangerous. But I'm sorry, I just can't put up with nonsense anymore.

Me: Yeah, I know what you mean. My female friends are definitely wanting to deny anything is different and then get really upset when they don't understand why they feel emotional for apparently no reason. And my male friends say it's just ageing, so get on with it and what's the point in researching it anyway. I also feel that some others think I am dangerous to be around, so I feel that, for example, my male friends telling me to just get on with it, is an indication that they feel out of their depth and so the blanket statement of "just get on with it" is their way of boxing me in and trying to take away my power.

The nurse has finished my dressing and I take my leave. Just before I open the door to exit.

Nurse: Oh! I'm having a hot flush – I was waiting for you to go so I can put the fan on.....

Chapter 1: The Initial Engagement

Introduction

This opening chapter introduces the topic of menopause and my reasons for undertaking the research. I begin with an overview of the physical and psychological changes that were taking place in my life as I began to navigate my menopausal transition. The medicalisation of menopause in my western culture is considered, together with other cultural views of the menopausal woman which may offer alternative ways to engage with the transition. The absence of attention to the psychological and spiritual aspects of the change of life are reflected on, setting the stage for the research journey.

Background to the Research

This dissertation chronicles one woman's voyage of discovery through her menopausal transition – that woman is me. Starting the Doctor of Education (EdD) at the University of Bristol coincided with my experiencing symptoms of the peri-menopause (Kenton, 1998). This period, which heralds the menopausal process in some women was a challenging time for me, full of physical and psychological struggles (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). My body was changing and my weight increased, even though I had not changed my diet; I was moody and irritable for no apparent reason; at times I was lightheaded and forgetful; other times my emotions would yo-yo from anxiety, to depression, anger and tearfulness. I felt lost at sea, unable to find understanding or meaning in what was happening for me. I was experiencing symptoms of the change of life (Boice, 2007). No one had explained what might happen to me once I started my transition. I read what I could find, and surfed the internet, trying to discover information that made sense for me. Other women I spoke to (acquaintances and friends), shared their frustrations at the difficulty in accessing support for their transitions. It was this drive to understand my own process through menopause that anchored the topic firmly into my mind.

I am an integrative transpersonal psychotherapist by profession. This means that I have been trained in different modalities which provide me with maps or frameworks with which to view and engage with client material (Cortright, 1997). The different approaches that I work with in my counselling and psychotherapy practice are: psychodynamic (comprising early life theories, such as Freud's sexual developmental stages (Jacobs, 2004), unconscious process, such as defence mechanisms (Storr, 1999), object relations theory (Jacobs, 2004), and attachment theory (Holmes, 2001); humanistic, which places the emphasis on the

therapist/client relationship and the fostering of positive self-regard for the client, containment, and personal agency (Rowan, 2005); existential, whereby the central tenets which are seen to be key to facilitating clients' growth are reflecting on the tension between the inevitability of death and the drive to continue to live, acceptance of the possibility of freedom, the experience of isolation, and what meaning life can hold (Yalom, 1991); and transpersonal which views the spiritual nature of the client as important as the psychological issues and takes the view that often, through a crisis, there is an opportunity to grow (Cortright, 1997; Hamilton, 2014). Within the transpersonal framework is the idea of the creative imagination, symbols and archetypes which aid clients to undergo an individuation process (Hamilton, 2014). Carl Jung used the idea of the Self to explain his comprehension of who a person is, and for him, individuation describes the process of growth, whereby through working with our unconscious material, we have the ability to access our potential to become all that we can be (Storr, 1998). In the therapeutic process, Jung placed great emphasis on the stages and operations of alchemy, as a way to map the inner world of the psyche and these are explained on pages 12-14 (Edinger, 1994). This approach to depth psychology which forms an important part of transpersonal psychotherapeutic work, has the ability to track conscious and unconscious processes as one journeys towards individuation.

As I worked through my EdD programme, a number of clients between the ages of 45 and 56 came to see me for counselling and psychotherapy. All were women who were experiencing some physical and psychological challenges as they were navigating their peri-menopause and menopause transition, just as I was. I was moved to research the topic of menopause through my engagement with these women, who like me wanted to know why no-one had ever told them about this great change in their lives. I felt that this transition signalled a major shift in my life and in those of these women, who wanted to understand what was going on for them, just as I wanted to understand what was going on for me.

I began to realise from wider reading, chance encounters and conversations with women that menopause is not experienced the same by any one individual (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). It is a deeply unique process for all who go through it; some women experience an easy and natural transition; others go through menopause at an early age, perhaps due to illness; and there are those, who like me, are challenged in our 40's and 50's with physical and psychological symptoms (Boice, 2007). If I could chronicle the journey through my unique transition, then perhaps this might give other women who are looking for support, a springboard from which

to delve deeply and find nurturing ways to nourish and understand their transitions for themselves.

After I finished my four year diploma training, I elected to do a research MA in Transpersonal Counselling and Psychotherapy. My topic was to look at transpersonal psychotherapy and shamanism as offering ways to heal feminine wounding and reclaim personal power. The art of shamanism is present in all societies and cultures. Its rich eclectic practices span the passage of time and are embedded deeply in all civilisations (Walsh, 2007). The anthropologist Michael Harner introduced the practice to a western audience (North America and Europe). His offering, termed “Core Shamanism” is an alternative approach to well-being. He asserts that shamanism is not a religion but a methodology by which one’s personal power may be restored and maintained to help the self and others heal on different levels of mind, body and spirit (Harner, 1990). I had already undergone training in shamanic healing for a few years prior to embarking on the psychotherapy diploma, and was interested in the combined wisdom of these two approaches to foster healing and help myself and others to embody our own personal power. When I started this research for the doctorate, I realised that perhaps my menopausal transition was about a deeper engagement and embodiment of my personal power; it felt like a clarion call for me to grow and individuate through this powerful transition.

An Interesting Research Problem

Menopause is hidden, secret and not talked about. It is either disregarded or medicalised in the United Kingdom where I live, Europe and North America (Mackie, 1997). In the medical model prevalent in these countries, the transition is defined as a medical, technical phenomenon of the body and it is considered a disease in need of a cure (Komesaroff, 1997). Hunter (2014) defines the western medical model of menopause (which originated in the twentieth century) as an oestrogen deficiency disease and goes on to say that the menopause is:

... a cluster of symptoms caused by hormone deficiency and treatable with HRT. While initially recommended for the treatment of hot flushes, HRT has been advocated for the alleviation of symptoms, as well as the prevention of osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and even dementia in postmenopausal women (p.779).

The European Menopause and Andropause society (EMAS) who provide training and education to the medical profession have issued new guidelines to expand the medical model (Stute et al. 2016). EMAS notes that menopausal women:

...present with complex medical issues that lie beyond the traditional scope of gynaecologists and general practitioners (GPs). The European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS) therefore provides a holistic model of care for healthy menopause (HM). The HM healthcare model's core consists of a lead clinician, specialist nurse(s) and the woman herself, supported by an interdisciplinary network of medical experts and providers of alternative/complementary medicine (p.1).

The vast majority of research concerning menopause has centred on the medicalisation of this change, with an emphasis on relieving symptoms which are seen to be a deficiency of hormones in a woman's body (Kaplan, 1997; Sievert, 2006). What this implies is that no matter what a menopausal woman is experiencing, if she goes to her GP for help to alleviate her symptoms, she will most likely be prescribed medication, or perhaps if she is lucky, the GP may be open to talking about alternative/complementary medicine. In either case, the emphasis is on ingesting something to alleviate symptoms. Little attention is paid to the spiritual and psychological aspects of this rite of passage. As a psychotherapist and a woman traversing menopause, I want to know how I can begin to understand and respond on deeper levels to the spiritual and psychological needs of myself and my clients experiencing menopause.

Complex issues of power and politics pervade women's mid-life transitions, particularly in the way that women are viewed in our culture. This can lead to a disconnection with our bodies, mind and spirit. As Mackie (1997) notes, women who are experiencing this change are banded together and given a label – 'menopausal'. They are then completely separated and isolated from each other because of the transition and its negative connotations. Mackie sees this happening because we are not seen as whole women, but rather viewed as physical bodies and therefore just one part of our identity is seen. Because of this split which Mackie identifies, menopause becomes a silent transition, often leaving women feeling powerless, as they grapple with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual crisis (Shinoda Bolen, 2002).

A menopausal woman's life is full of complexity; she is positioned physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually in a body which is changing and ageing. She is also situated within a particular social, cultural, and economic setting (Harris, 2013; Nosek et al. 2012). In the 21st century, United Kingdom culture that I am part of, many women can feel disconnected from this completely natural metamorphosis and often seek unnatural ways to help them through their process, such as Hormone Replacement Therapy (Achterberg, 2002; Daly, 1997). It can also be a time when underlying psychological issues or health concerns come to the fore, that

may not have been encountered before. This life transition can have a major impact on all aspects of women's lives (Martin, 1997; Shinoda Bolen, 2002; 2007).

In my psychotherapy practice, female clients journeying through their own menopausal transitions are often grieving the loss of their youth, health, relationships, fertility or loved ones, such as parents. Relationships with partners can be strained, for example once children leave home (prevalent at this time of life); existential questions may arise which beg answers and menopause can herald a period of crisis in a woman's life (Boice, 2007). Loss becomes one of the major issues through the transition as women navigate the grieving process. I am fascinated that Elizabeth Kubler Ross's model of grieving associated with death and dying, at times mirrors the process of my menopausal transition. This is a framework that is often utilised in grief counselling and psychotherapy in the UK and the USA. The five stages of the model are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kubler Ross & Kessler, 2014). These stages can be applied to the menopausal transition in ways that may help women to understand that they are grieving on deep psychological levels, as their bodies change with the passage of time and they begin the process of their unique, individual transformation (King, Hunter, & Harris, 2005). People often think of the stages as lasting weeks or months, but these stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes, hours or even years, as we spin in and out of one and then another. We do not enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion. We may feel one, then another and travel back again to the first one. Not everyone will go through all of these stages, and they may only travel through one or two (Kubler Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Below is a brief description of the stages and their possible relevance to the menopausal transition:

1. *Denial*

Denial is a refusal to accept the reality of what is going on for us through the transition. This can be a traumatic time in a woman's life and the defence mechanism of denial is a natural way that the psyche tries to control and deal with the physical and emotional changes that menopause can provoke (Shinoda Bolen, 2002).

2. *Anger*

Anger manifests in different ways throughout the transition, often being projected outwards onto others who are not able to understand what is being experienced, or inwards onto ourselves

through our own ignorance of the importance of the changes taking place within us (Boice, 2007). Rebelliousness and a wish to break free from imposed societal and cultural restrictions can be birthed by the onset of anger during this transition (Shinoda Bolen, 2007).

3. *Depression*

Confusion and shock during this change of life can plunge a woman into depression – a place where she is cut off psychologically from the transition and enters a black hole of negativity around herself and her body (Muhlbauer, 2007). This disconnection to self can also alienate women from loved ones and a society which does not acknowledge and celebrate the naturalness of this change.

4. *Bargaining*

A particularly uncertain and difficult stage in the menopausal transition, bargaining becomes a time when a women can feel anxious to do something to stop the psychological and physical pain she may be experiencing. Often during this level of grieving, she can resort to medication or alternative therapies in a desperate attempt to banish the uncomfortable changes that can be encountered through this natural transition (King et al. 2005). Kessler and Kubler Ross (2014) describe this stage as a time where we are disorientated and confused, constantly asking ‘if only...’ or ‘What if...’ questions. It is a stage where we want to go back in time before the event which causes the grieving process to manifest, so that our lives can be in stasis again. Guilt often accompanies the bargaining stage and we can feel that the grief we are experiencing is caused by something we have done wrong.

5. *Acceptance*

This stage moves a woman out of feeling hopeless and helpless around her menopausal transition and into a place of peace and inner power at her changing mind and body. For me, this stage heralds an anchoring of wisdom and understanding which occurs through conscious exploration and engagement with the transition. Acceptance is a key stage in coming to terms with this change of life.

The Kubler Ross model is a loose framework which I have used as an aide memoire, through which to navigate and understand my menopausal process. At the forefront of my mind through this research, is the reality that my personal grieving process has not always fitted into this framework and I am aware that one size does not fit all. Maddrell (2015) considers that grief is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, complex internal emotional and psychological response

to loss. Loss is a universal experience which is moved through differently within each individual. The grief I have felt as a result of menopause has not just involved the death of loved ones, it has highlighted my personal loss in terms of a changing body, which is not as strong as it used to be, as well as coming to terms with aging. It is important to note that the type and circumstances of a loss which is experienced, are important factors in determining its impact on an individual (Kubler Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Whilst Kubler Ross's model is not considered a rigid process for grieving, allowing for each stage to coexist and for different periods of time, it has drawn criticism, primarily around the claims of its universal application and its lack of consideration of the roles of culture, gender, ethnicity, belief systems, age and other variations (Garfield, 2017). More contemporary grief theorists hesitate to name stages of grief, seeing these approaches as unhelpful for dealing with the conflicting feelings brought about by loss. Instead, they talk about individual griever's being allowed to find their own truthful expression of thoughts and feelings based around their personal beliefs (Wright, 2004). Newer models often emphasise a person's empowerment against the backdrop of their individual personality and philosophy of life (Zlatin, 1995). The key point from more contemporary thought around grief is that there is valuable information to be gleaned from observing patterns in grief response, but that these patterns should not conceal the significant uniqueness of the experience of individual grief (Aiken, 2000; Neimeyer & Currier, 2009).

The western, British culture that I am part of, holds many taboos around death, loss and grieving and this can be problematic for individuals who do not feel safe or at ease when expressing intense and deep feelings (Giblin & Hug, 2006; Hooyman & Kramer, 2008). Those in the midst of grief are expected to come to terms with the loss and their own grief quietly and in private and to return quickly to day-to-day life so as not to be disruptive to the lives and sensibilities of others (Howarth, 2014).

Many other cultural communities (for example, Aborigine and Native American communities) accept death and loss as a natural part of living and ceremonial practices act as a celebration of the importance of what or who is passing, with some expressing rich mourning traditions with the aim of increasing the acceptance of death, loss and acknowledgement of grief. Death is seen to be a celebration of that which has passed (Giblin & Hug, 2006).

I have noticed through my own experience and that of my clients that this important transition – menopause – which occurs at some point in all women's lives, is often surrounded by

negative connotations from both men and women, with little attention paid to the naturalness of this change (Harris, 2013). And yet it is a natural process of transmutation in a woman's body which heralds a new beginning and a new chapter in life (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). Thus, this life transition also becomes a quest for meaning and understanding of the ageing woman's place in society and culture (Campioni, 1997).

Reflecting back on the conversation with a nurse in the Prologue and my own experience and that of female clients in my therapy practice, the issue of shame permeates the transition for many; shame about aging; shame around losing our youthfulness; shame around an ever changing body (for example, weight gain or hair loss); the shame of showing any symptoms of the change through hot flushes (for example, a possible damp patch showing through clothing); and shame at not being honoured by the societies and cultures we live in (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). Ideas around the aging feminine body and women's physical attributes have been entrenched in western culture for hundreds of years. The following words by Mortimer Collins (1812-1867) enforce the patriarchal view of the aging woman:

A man's as old as he feels

A woman's as old as she looks (Bartlet, 2012).

As a menopausal woman myself, I am shocked at how I see Collins' view of women being played out in my life, through the media, advertising and the portrayal of older women, marginalising us because of our ageing bodies and loss of youthful attributes (Kaplan, 1997).

Living in a patriarchal society, has led to men also being silenced around the menopause that all the women in their lives will encounter at some point (Boice, 2007). Men are not invited to share the transition with their loved ones – rather they are excluded by the pervasive negative discourses surrounding the transition and almost programmed to rely on medical help to normalise the women (and therefore themselves) in their lives (Sybylla, 1997). Menopausal women also silence the transition often by focussing on their physical ailments and so the message passed on to younger women in their lives, breeds negativity and fear for their own passage through midlife (Chrisler, 2007).

I noticed in the conversation with the nurse that she and I both felt infantilised by our inability to sometimes control our expulsion of urine – often a normal symptom of the transition, and that the wearing of pads evoked helplessness as it does in very young children. Not being able

to contain the water within us psychologically puts pressure on us and sends a negative message that we are powerless and need another person to fix us (Shinoda Bolen, 2002).

I am also aware that women in mid-life are not the only ones who experience menopause. There are those who will go through this transition at a much earlier time in their lives, possibly due to illness, and indeed some will enter the menopausal transition as a result of medication they have been prescribed (Pope, 2017). What about their experiences of early menopause? What help is there for them to experience this transition in a psychologically healthy way?

Is there another way?

In contrast to the prevailing western discourse on the midlife woman, in ancient shamanic and goddess cultures, women's rites of passage were embraced, honoured and celebrated. These mysteries were sacred moments in women's lives, mirroring the natural forces of nature and seen as vital to the health of the whole community (Hartley, 2001). In modern cultures where these traditions are still honoured, a very different view of the ageing menopausal woman appears which vastly contrasts with the way women at mid-life are viewed in our society, as described by Ussher (2006):

The notion of the midlife period as a 'golden age' found in Buddhist-influenced Thailand, or in Mayan Indian culture, where older women are positioned as wise, and gain power, respect and freedom as a result, is antithetical to Western fantasies of femininity. Instead, we are told tales of the dark, dangerous, debilitated state of women at menopause and beyond (p.126).

How far we have come from the belief that women become powerful shamans, wise women, and elders only after transition through menopause (Dobkin de Rios, 2002)? Instead, the prevalent discourse in our culture is surrounded by ambiguities. As Campioni (1997) notes:

The menopausal woman acquires a variety of social and psychological meanings: she may be 'wise woman', 'oracle', 'priestess' or 'healer'; but she is also 'monster', 'harbinger of man's fate', 'evil force', 'destroyer', 'avenger', 'bitter and twisted hag', 'witch' or 'castrating bitch' (Campioni, p.113).

I am aware that in some other cultures, menopause is seen as a great rite of passage, where the ending of menstrual periods marks the time when women come into their wisdom and personal power (Dobkin de Rios, 2002). In indigenous communities (such as American Indian,

Aboriginal and communities in South America) where spirituality is key to the life of the people, women are not seen as shamans or healers of their tribes until they have gone through the menopausal transition (Achterberg, 2002). There is a deep split between east and west in terms of how midlife women are seen, and these other cultural attitudes to women can offer a deeper way to view this important transition in our western culture and society (Ussher, 2006). I resonate with this view and it accords with my own exploratory journey into finding alternative ways to connect with the transition.

Mapping the inner terrain

In the research process described in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, I explain how I utilised the approach of Jungian alchemy as a way to understand and map my inner process and journey through menopause. I entered into a deep psychological alchemical process, where I followed strands through potent stages, not in a linear fashion, but in a spiralling of refinement (Schwartz-Salant, 1995). These alchemical stages were mirrored in the autoethnography and poetic representation of my work.

The process of alchemy involves four distinct stages which are given Latin names. As Hamilton (2014) notes:

Each stage always involves purification (in order to progress in the transformation); marriage (or a coming together of the opposites); and death which paves the way for birth (usually symbolising the beginning of a new stage) (p.11).

The Alchemical Stages in Psychotherapy (Edinger, 1994)

Nigredo or blackening, is the term used to describe the first stage, connecting us to the dark, heavy and difficult material that characterises the initial stages of therapy, when a person experiences conflict, depression or is troubled. The client's old unsupportive belief system is dying (mortificatio) and preparing the ground for rebirth.

Albedo forms the second stage. The movement from the first stage to the second involves a gradual rising above (sublimatio) the issues allowing the client to see where and how they have been caught in unhealthy patterns. This new found insight enables choice and thus the potential for freedom from complex psychological issues.

Citrinas or the yellowing is the third stage. The alchemical marriage of soul and spirit takes place. This stage is largely unnoticed as it is most often experienced unconsciously through dreams, except in individuals who have connected deeply to their spiritual process.

Rubedo is the name given to the fourth stage and signifies re-birth into life. At this stage, the client's task is to re-forge their life, that is, they must implement the insights and knowledge they have gained from the process into the fabric of their daily life.

The Seven Alchemical Operations in Psychotherapy (Edinger, 1994)

Hamilton (2014) offers a succinct outline of the operations of the alchemical model:

The seven alchemical operations are the processes that take place during alchemical transformation and which promote and accelerate the process. They are the operations of purification: solutio, calcinatio, sublimatio and coagulatio - purification by water, fire, air and earth respectively; separatio - separating the subtle from the gross in one's psyche; coniunctio - the marriage of opposites in the psyche; and mortificatio - death of the old self. From a transpersonal perspective, the operations can be seen as the actions of our guiding spirit, helping us to achieve self-realisation (pp.11-12).

Solutio is connected to the element of water and involves dissolving the fixed identifications that may be causing a client's problems. Tears can be seen as the dissolving agent as the person connects to their suffering instead of resisting or defending against it.

Calcinatio is connected to the element of fire and Jung equates fire with libido (Edinger, 1995). This stage is concerned with the purification from the unbridled, unconscious, instinctual concupiscence of the client's ego to the spiritual fire of illumination and revelation.

Sublimatio is connected to the element of air. It is an elevating process of rising and expanding. The psychological meaning of this stage is being able to rise above a problem, abstraction and distillation leading to detachment, insight and the capacity to conceptualise a problem.

Coagulatio is connected to the earth element. Hamilton (2014) offers the following understanding of this stage:

If something coagulates in us, it becomes conscious, like a building block for further development.....Psychologically, it is the embodying of an insight, a new way of being in our personality. Spiritually, it is the embodying of our true nature, of grounding the most subtle aspects of our soul in everyday life (p.44).

Mortificatio connects with all symbolism to do with death, decomposition and destruction. It is the imagery that describes the breaking down of the ego that is often experienced as frightening and to be resisted. In order for renewal to happen, death of the old order must be experienced.

Separatio is the alchemical operation that refers to the sorting, extraction, filtering and differentiating of confused or mixed substances into their separate components. We see the need for separatio in clients who are completely identified with a situation. At a pre-personal level, separation is about ego development. At a personal level, it is the separation of the individual from the collective in order to find personal meaning. At a transpersonal level, it is the separation from worldly identifications to transpersonal realities.

Coniunctio is the alchemical operation that refers to union or fusion. Sexual images and images of marriage are connected to coniunctio. The Lesser Coniunctio is the union of substances that are not thoroughly separated and is followed by mortificatio as the process begins its cycle of purification again. Love at this stage is driven by sexual desire. The Greater Coniunctio produces the 'Philosopher's Stone', which is a product of the final union of the purified opposites. It is driven by transpersonal love which generates and multiplies having the capacity to transform all base materials into the gold of spirit.

Viewing my journey through these different lenses, I was open to discovering whether through shining a spiritual perspective on this topic, my attitude to my own personal journey through the transition could undergo change, so that I might accept this natural process and find strength through my experience. I was searching to see whether excavating the deeper meanings of menopause could support me and those that come seeking therapy during their own transitions, to ease our passage through this time in our lives. It is a time when women are challenged to take radical care of themselves and, I believe, a chance to discover ways to celebrate and learn to reclaim our personal power (Sybylla, 1997).

A Spiritual Perspective

As I reflected on the conversation I had with the nurse in the Prologue, fear of this topic was palpable in my body. An insistent need to express the anxiety and pressure I felt was revealed:

Worms

I have opened a Can of Worms

Spilling and wriggling on to the page.

Blind.

Hating white lightness.

Craving damp darkness.

Ripples of revulsion

And the knowing that

I can never close this tin again.

At first sight, this encapsulates what researching my personal engagement with menopause evoked in me. The worms reminded me of the unconscious strands I was loath to examine as I moved through this transition. I had opened this can of worms, and I might never be the same again. All I could see were the ugly, ungainly aspects of menopause, burrowing deeply into the most sensitive parts of me. Negative thoughts of myself as a menopausal woman were rife: “I am ungainly; I am ugly; my body does not fit me; I have no direction. What should I do?” And a small, voice whispered “I wish there was another way”.

On further reflection, I was met with a deepening resolution that slowly surfaced into consciousness. A small light was beginning to shine, slowly opening me up to a new possibility, for a healing, spiritual engagement with menopause. I realised that worms are creatures of the earth. They may not look aesthetically pleasing to my eyes, but they have an immense purpose: they break down matter and fertilize the soil; worms nourish the ground and protect vulnerable new life sprouting from seeds. In the moist darkness of the earth, they work tirelessly to enable the seedlings to thrive and grow into the light.

For me, this is a spiritual insight and one that goes deeper than just my thought processes. The worms dwell in my hidden unconscious shadow world, fertilizing the ground, patiently encouraging the hidden, wounded fronds to push through into consciousness (Hillman, 1996). A process of undertaking the hero's/heroine's journey into the underworld to reclaim those parts of me that are hidden through conditioning, shame and fear was called for (Campbell,

2008; Murdoch, 1990). It was time to step off the cliff into the unknown, with the aid of archetypal symbols that were waiting to emerge from the shadow (Shinoda Bolen, 2007).

Here were clues that I needed to travel through my transition of menopause in a different way. Those cultures that view a person's spiritual life as being equal to their mental, emotional or physical life, show menopause to be a positive transition for women. In these societies, women are revered as wise and powerful members of their communities and this, for me, challenges the pervading discourse of my western culture and society that views menopause as a disease and something which is disregarded (Mackie, 1997). I needed to challenge the meta-narrative of the medicalisation of menopause (Sybella, 1997). My research is about moving through this transition in non-invasive, kinder, caring ways. Ways of the heart and spirit which can bring a healing balm to all the wounds I encountered on this journey (Inayat-Khan, 2000).

This was an intensely personal journey and piece of work, where I was researcher and researched, and had no specific outcomes. I was aware that even though I did not include participants who were my clients, or other women going through the transition, the people I came into contact with, like the nurse in the Prologue, were also the researched as they would be viewed in my work and seen through my perspective. This brought an ethical responsibility of reflexivity, on an on-going basis (Finlay, 2008). This personal work holds the possibility of benefiting myself and other women traversing this intensely personal and sometimes difficult passage, and offers a different, beneficial approach to tending to our own psychological and spiritual health. I also believe that this research might provide alternative ways for women to derive personal meaning and understanding on different levels as they journey through the change of life.

Prevailing cultural and western attitudes disempower women in midlife, and it is important to note that some women undergoing the transition are contesting and challenging the medical model, seeking other explanations for the changes they experience in their bodies (Boice, 2007; Campioni, 1997). Through this research, I am adding my voice to the emergent discourse around the menopausal change, with the intention to add to a growing corpus of literature in the field. My hope is that menopause becomes demystified, and brought out from behind the veils of silence which currently surround it, bringing to light awareness of the spiritual and psychological implications of this time in a woman's life (Mackie, 1997). This research may offer ways for women to reclaim their personal power through conscious, spiritual and

psychological engagement with the fundamental changes that many women encounter through the transition.

My research was born from my own quest to understand what this major life transition meant for me. Entering into this EdD had coincided with a range of menopausal symptoms that I experienced, such as hot flushes, bodily aches and pains, intermittent bouts of memory loss, periods of depression and bursts of unexplained anger. I had also suffered the loss of loved ones through death. Added to this, in my first week of starting the EdD, I discovered that I had inherited polycystic liver disease, which is a rare genetic condition. We are all born with small cysts on our liver and kidneys. In a small number of the world's population (2%) and mostly in women, these may start to grow and cause severe pain and discomfort, particularly during the time of the menopausal transition (Everson, Helmke, & Doctor, 2008). This had happened to me. I had one cyst on my liver which grew to 16 centimetres and contained 2 litres of fluid which had to be drained during an invasive operation.

As a transpersonal psychotherapist, I am aware that illness and unease in the body also has its own psychological and spiritual facets which are explored through this research (Cortright, 1997; Hamilton, 2014; Shinoda Bolen, 2007). The deeper I engaged with my own process, the more I was able to attend to my own and my clients' spiritual and psychological needs at this important stage of our life experience.

Some issues in researching myself through this transition

I am aware that by researching my own experience of the menopausal transition and exploring different ways to navigate it, other issues in researching the Self arise.

- As this was intensely personal research, into a topic which is completely individual, yet happens to all women at some time during our lives, I was aware that I needed to be mindful that my research maintained its integrity and did not become a self-indulgent, solipsistic or narcissistic piece of work (Ellis, 2004). It needed to be written in such a way as to engage the reader and to encourage their own personal exploration of this immense and complex topic.
- Boundaries were an intricate part of this personal exploration because I needed to be clear about what was appropriate for me to share (rather than expose), and how this might be done so as to offer the full flavour of my experience to others. In the conversation with a nurse (set out in the Prologue), it was important that I found a way

to portray the conversation, so that it would be extremely difficult for anyone to identify the nurse in the piece. Our shared feelings and mutual understandings of the menopausal transition we both encountered felt important to share in the Prologue, because my aim is to contribute to parting the veils which surround this transition and the conversation allowed for the issues to reveal themselves for research.

- It was important that I discovered the right way to chronicle my journey and find the appropriate format in which to present it, so as to honour the process and foster a resonance with my work in others. Presentation of personal material needed to bring clarity and understanding to the process being explored and encountered.
- I needed to find ways to be able to tread the fine line between total immersion in the topic and stepping back to find some separation in order to make good choices on the material which the research generated. It was important that I took a reflexive stance through the whole of this personal engagement in order to be able to mine for myself the value of what I was experiencing.

Conclusion

The Prologue which presented a conversation that I had with a nurse, was offered at the beginning of this dissertation because it highlighted to me the following key issues for my research: people's assumptions of who I am as an ageing woman; my own lack of self-care and ungrounded state, which brought me to the nurse in the first place, and prompted the question of how I could find the right ways to nurture and take care of myself through this transition; loss of youth and disconnection with self; disconnection and silencing of this transition by both sexes in this culture; infantilising menopausal women; the perception that somehow menopausal women are dangerous; physical issues that can occur during the menopause inducing shame; and a breathing space opening up when the nurse and I touched on a spiritual aspect of our journeys.

I was left with a feeling that so far on my journey, I had forgotten an important element of my conscious connection with menopause, that was, the spiritual dimension. Other cultures where women's rites of passage are honoured and celebrated, revere the mid-life ageing menopausal woman (Achterberg, 2002; Dobkin de Rios, 2002; Ussher, 2006). Often in these cultures, women are seen as wise and the healers of their communities. These ways of viewing women at mid-life challenge the metanarrative of western culture and society which views women as in need of curing (Komesaroff, 1997). I embarked on a personal journey of exploration,

seeking to understand and find meaning in my transition. I wondered whether there was a hidden wisdom in this change for me; perhaps if I could consciously walk through this enormous change in my life, looking outside of the medical western model towards a different, spiritual way of navigating menopause, I could find a deeper engagement and this in turn might enable me to facilitate and guide others who find little to support this transition in our culture.

Next Steps

Below is an overview of the structure of this dissertation, which gives an in depth account of the research journey I engaged in as I travelled deeper into my menopausal transition.

Chapter 2

This chapter is a literature review of the topic of menopause from different perspectives. The literature presented examines issues and complexities that the menopausal change can elicit for some women traversing this rite of passage. It begins with an exploration of what menopause is and considers different concepts that surround the transition; difficulties that may arise through menopause for some women; the importance of challenging the medicalisation of the transition and widening the view that menopause is a disease in need of medical treatment; culminating in an examination of different cultural, spiritual and psychological lenses that allow for the transition to be engaged with in more positive ways.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 sets out my approach to the research and why I chose particular methodologies and methods to engage in collecting and re-presenting my personal material. All the methods I engaged in are explored and their relevance to my search for meaning through menopause are discussed. The methodologies of autoethnography and writing as a method of inquiry which I utilised to aid me to find creative ways of expressing my menopausal change are reviewed, together with a discussion on the ethical considerations and complexities of doing personal research.

Chapter 4

Chapters 4 and 5 detail the process I underwent through personal engagement with menopause, the highs and the lows, connection and disconnection which flavoured the whole of my experience. This engagement led to autoethnographical writing and the creative outpourings

which writing as inquiry facilitated, so that I could start the journey of understanding what the deeper meaning of menopause might hold for me.

Chapter 4 offers accounts of my personal engagement in two shamanic retreats. I re-present some of the creative work which arose through my deeper encounter with the topic of menopause, and what I discovered through these processes.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 continues my engagement with the transition and offers further creative representations of what emerged through aspects of the advanced training in psychotherapy (with its focus on Jungian alchemy). I express the difficulties I encountered in my process which led to taking an impromptu solitary retreat into woodland, and describe what transpired through a group Sufi silent alchemical retreat (a requirement of the advanced training in psychotherapy).

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 sets out my conclusions in relation to my research. It includes reflections on my engagement with the research process. Key concepts arising from the research are discussed in relation to the literature review in Chapter 2. The usefulness of the methodologies I used and the methods that generated my personal material are examined, together with the contribution this research makes to the growing literature and information on the menopause. Finally the chapter concludes with implications of the research, final thoughts and next steps.

Epilogue

The completion of this research through a creative piece entitled “Menopause Speaks”.

Appendix

Completed University of Bristol Ethics form.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this research, I engaged in a process of discovery regarding transformation, through the spiritual and psychological aspects of my menopause (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). I chose to research alternative ways to view this transition, which are diametrically opposed to the paradigm of medicalisation, where menopause is viewed as a disease in need of a cure (Mackie, 1997; Greer, 2018). The premise of my study is that there are complex problems and issues prevalent in researching the menopausal transition, such as those discussed in Chapter 1. In this chapter I review literature that examines issues and complexities that the menopausal change can bring for some women. I begin with a section on how menopause is defined. I then move on to looking at the difficulties that some women (including myself) encounter through the transition. A journey to different cultural perspectives on menopause is subsequently offered, culminating with a section on the psychological and spiritual aspects of the transition. The literature presented in this chapter served to offer me a springboard, to reflect on different perspectives and insights into ways that I and other women could engage with this transition and thus played a significant role in the design of my study.

The Menopausal Transition

“Why the hell did no-one tell me about this?”

Much of the literature pertaining to the menopausal transition which I have uncovered, derives from two sources: firstly the medical and biological, reproductive sciences (Sievert, 2006); and secondly, the self-help genre of book publishing (Baker, 2013). It has been challenging to discover academic literature on the topic from a psychological, spiritual and even social perspective. I am interested that both of the genres mentioned above, seem to be approaching menopause from the disease and curing angle, something that needs to be helped to be managed, in other words, solution focussed (Kenton, 1998). In this chapter I give a critically reflective analysis of relevant academic literature on the menopausal transition.

What is Menopause?

A sensible place to start, is to uncover the meaning of the word ‘menopause’. It derives from the Greek words *meno* (which means ‘month’) and *pausis* (meaning ‘halt’ or ‘cessation’). In medical terms, menopause means the last time a woman has a monthly period (Boch, 2002;

Kenton, 1998). The British Medical Association (BMA) defines menopause as “... the cessation of menses for at least 12 consecutive months, without some other reason for amenorrhoea (such as pregnancy, hormone therapy, or other medical condition)” (BMJ, 2018).

In common usage, the term ‘menopause’ is used to describe the whole phase a woman goes through during this change of life, when levels of progesterone and oestrogen production slow down (Boice, 2007; Sievert, 2006). Menopause is usually divided into three stages: *perimenopause*, where the hormonal shifts are happening and a woman is still having periods, albeit irregularly; *menopause*, the time at which the last period occurs; and *post-menopause*, the period when the reproductive capacity of a woman has definitely finished. This occurs around 14-18 months after the last menstrual period (Kenton, 1998). The menopausal transition is individual and unique to all women, some going through it for a few months, whilst for others it can last up to fifteen years (Weed, 2002). Menopause is also a change that can happen to women not just at mid-life, but in their twenties and thirties, due to illness and medical procedures (Sievert, 2006). The majority of women however, do go through their menopausal change at around the age of 50, with the beginnings of the perimenopause stage stirring in their early 40s (Kenton, 1998; Utz, 2011).

Difficulties with the Menopausal Transition

According to Herzig (2012) Menopause was first identified as a deficiency disease by Robert Wilson in 1968. This led to the medicalisation of the menopausal transition in western countries such as the USA and the UK. Macpherson (1995) stated, “Medicalization occurs when human experiences are defined as medical problems to be treated by medical personnel” (p.347 in Herzig, 2012, p.521). Herzig maintains that due to its construction as a deficiency disease, menopause has widely been accepted under this guise of scientific truth by the general public. Post-menopausal women were asked to define their menopausal voices.

Nosek et al. (2012) carried out a study examining women’s experiences of distress during menopause, using narrative interviews, with 15 participants. The women communicated their narratives on psychological and physical distress and how this impacts their relationships with partners, work and their families. The distress factors they chose to ask the women about were: menstrual changes, emotional instability, vaginal dryness, and decreased libido. It is clear from this research that menopause had a huge impact on all areas of the women’s lives in this study and I consider Nosek et al. highlighted the important understanding that ‘distress’ has different connotations for different people and that this complexity arose from the participants’

narratives, where for some distress centred on physical issues, and for others, not feeling understood, and/or psychological distress. It would have been interesting to have read more of what the participants experienced in their own words as some of their narratives were short. I am also curious that none of the women identified other distressing issues, such as grieving and issues around ageing.

I resonate with Nosek et al. (2012) who note that when women go to see their GPs because of menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, the whole of a woman's experience at this time of life, including psychological and emotional, is not taken into consideration, and the physical symptoms only are considered. This has been my experience outlined in the Prologue. They advise that healthcare practitioners, whilst paying attention to physical issues, must also have an understanding of symptoms in the context of the lives of the women experiencing difficulties (Utian, 2005a, 2005b; Woods & Mitchell, 2005, in Nosek et al. 2012). For them, it is paramount that attention be paid to the psychological, social and cultural issues of menopausal women seeking help from doctors. I too believe that it is important that the health system views menopausal women in a holistic way.

For many women, the stages leading up to and after menopause can be fraught with physical and psychological issues, as my own transition has been. Olchowska-Kotala (2017) carried out statistical research through questionnaires given to 100 women documenting their experience of body image during menopause. Her findings strike a chord with me in that the research indicated that some menopausal women find that their quality of life can be seriously affected by physical and psychological symptoms, and the changes in their bodies can lead to low self-esteem issues and negative body image. I too experienced these difficulties. In my opinion, however Olchowska-Kotala's research could have been more fruitful if participants had been encouraged to share actual narratives giving their own opinions, rather than just answering whether they agreed with a statement or not on the questionnaires. Rubenstein & Foster (2012) also note that the menopause transition is a universal marker which has parallels with the physiological and psychological changes associated with puberty and menarche. This fascinates me, as through my menopausal journey, I have, at times felt as if I was going through a teenage rebellion. In their mixed-methods study they explored women's views about menopause and any relationship between these and several measures of body consciousness. A total of 270 women in the UK completed surveys on menopausal attitudes, self-objectification, body surveillance and body shame. Findings were that women rated highly with regard to body dissatisfaction scales and having a negative attitude to their change of life.

There was a positive association between rating highly on body dissatisfaction scales and holding negative attitudes towards menopause. Interviews were conducted to investigate this further. Issues of ageing and body image were a prevalent concern for women in this research. This is an interesting piece of work because of its ability to garner information from a large number of women. However, none of the participants' answers to the survey questions were given, nor any narratives arising from later interviews.

Body image is one of the main issues which women navigating menopause report. Chrisler (2011) tells us that:

Because of Western societies' creation of a strong beauty culture and insistence that women pursue an illusive beauty ideal (Freedman, 1986; Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995; Wolf, 1991), because of the tendency in many societies to see youth and beauty as synonymous (Alderson, 1991), and because of the tendency to define woman as her body (Greenspan, 1983) or woman as her face (Sontag, 1979), one can expect to find women reporting body image concerns as they adjust to bodily changes that are concomitant with ageing (p.9).

My experience concurs with Chrisler's understanding, and she is adamant that the fact of the existence of menopause, requires many women to alter their views on body image. She says that it does not matter if we greet this transition with sadness due to loss, indifference at the whole process, or even with relief; the very fact it exists, means that women are forced to think about their bodies differently (Chrisler, 2007).

Chrisler (2013) maintains that many women carry shame around their bodies and reproductive cycles. She further notes that "Too many men and women absorb negative attitudes towards menstruation and menopause from popular culture, and those negative attitudes can affect broader attitudes toward women" (p.128). Winterich & Umberson (1999, in Chrisler, 2013) noted that the research available to them at the time suggested that to characterise menopause from the perspective of being a medical issue results in women feeling negatively about their change of life. They suggest that if menopause can be seen as a life transition, then this would be a positive framework for women to view their natural process. This is an important point which resonates with me and one that has driven me to research this change of life. Chrisler believes that because we live in cultures which value youth, menopause can be experienced by some as a threat, because it gives evidence of aging, through the symptoms of hot flushes, which announce to others that we are not fertile and are growing old (Chrisler, 2011). This can

also lead to vulnerability and embarrassment at being unable to hide the physical signs such as hot flushes from other people (Kenton, 1998). This has been my experience when I have had hot flushes in public, and also that of the nurse in my Prologue.

One of the difficulties that some menopausal women report, is depression and mood swings. According to psychoanalysis, menopause may herald a critical event or life crisis for a woman at mid-life and this signals challenges in self-concept (Avis Wake, 2003). Avis Wake (2003) notes that psychoanalytic theory argues that a woman's loss of her fertility psychologically affects her and that this can lead to depression (2003). Keefer & Blanchard (2005) assert that the actual experience of the change of life can be stressful for some women and this can lead to psychological distress. I concur with both views: as will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, I experienced depression and psychological wounding through my experience of the transition.

Women's midlife change through menopause is full of complexities which present trials and tasks for some women, navigating this time in their lives (Evans, 2008). I agree with Evans who notes there has been a lack of research into women's psychological, spiritual or physical progress through the transition. She asserts that much of the research focus has been on the negative aspects of the physical and psychological issues that can be experienced by some women at this time in their lives.

Arnold (2005) believes that most interpretations of the development of women at midlife have been biologically focussed and tied to reproduction. She says that menopause is frequently seen as a signpost which marks a woman's ageing process rather than an opportunity for growth.

This view is echoed by McQuaide (1998) who asserts that

From the perspective of the individual woman, the invisibility of women in midlife in the research literature leaves a woman at the mercy of cultural stereotypes and media portrayals, or lack of portrayals. Negative images of aging women abound and, without alternative images, serve to elicit a woman's own internalized ageism and sexism. Images of miserable empty nesters, women being left for younger women, menopausal madness, and dowager's humps can become self-fulfilling prophecies. A woman without alternative models and images may see her future in a limited way (p.22).

I feel McQuaide makes a significant point concerning positive role models for women navigating their menopausal transition. She goes on to say that no matter how prepared a woman is for her change in life, it can be a confusing, isolating and negative passage for some. She notes that although it is a normal life change, menopause and acceptance of ageing can be a difficult and painful time in a woman's life. McQuaide, notes that the midlife transition is the "...quintessential biopsychosocial experience. It is both crisis and opportunity" (McQuaide, 1998, p.132). From a biological perspective, there is a decrease in oestrogen, which causes many changes in a woman's body; hot flushes, memory lapses, night sweats, tiredness, possible changes in a woman's sexual drive, possible risk of heart disease and osteoporosis. Having experienced physical and psychological issues through my own passage, I agree with McQuaide that what had been for me, a life crisis, was in fact an opportunity to grow, understand myself on different levels and prepare for a new phase of life.

Michaud (2011) carried out a qualitative study which explored psychospiritual change in menopausal women. It is clear that her objective was to challenge the traditional western biomedical model that sees menopause as a medical condition rather than a natural event in women's lives. She believes that scant attention is given to understanding the importance of spiritual or transpersonal aspects of this change of life. Using narrative interviews and thematic analysis with 25 women, she highlighted the themes of silencing of the transition, importance of community with other women, a desire for more information on menopause and the importance of acknowledging internal psychological and spiritual experiences. According to Michaud (2011) traditional western research in the fields of biology and medicine sees menopause as being a medical issue, rather than a natural developmental stage in a woman's life. Viewing women in this way influences social and cultural responses towards the aging woman and offers little support to help them to have positive self-images that they can be healthy and have a good quality of life. Whilst Michaud (2011) goes on to tell us that some attention is given to spiritual/transpersonal and psychological aspects of the menopausal transition, this is found in popular and cross-cultural sources, rather than in the research literature. This has been my experience when trying to educate myself about my own transition. I find Michaud's research to be exciting and affirmative of the importance in attending to spiritual and psychological aspects of menopause, in order to present a holistic picture of the menopausal woman who is not just defined culturally and socially as an aging body, full of physical issues. I do acknowledge that this piece of research is biased towards the field of spirituality and the transpersonal, which may provide issues for those who do not

share Michaud's paradigm or understand the transpersonal. I believe it would also have been beneficial if the research had also looked at how these women navigate the physical issues of their individual menopausal experiences when viewed from a spiritual perspective.

The Menopausal Transition in Different Cultures

“I wonder if it's like that everywhere.”

In order to open my vision further and widen my gaze on menopause, I looked at literature which offered a different perspective on this important time in a woman's life. Boice (2007) notes that in Mayan, Japanese and some indigenous cultures, women are honoured and respected as they move through the menopausal transition. She stresses the importance of recognition and honouring this time in a woman's life; that it is important to mark the transition we go through at menopause, through rites and celebrations, in order to accept, acknowledge and welcome the change and importantly, have it witnessed by others. Northrup (2012) echoes this view and states that:

In some cultures, such as that of Hindu India, midlife is a time associated with the serious pursuit of the spiritual dimension of life... Our search for life's meaning begins to take on new urgency, and we begin to experience ourselves as potential vessels of the Spirit (p.71).

This view is echoed by AmyLee (2007), who notes that in her culture “The Iroquois embrace certain irrefutable precepts – one of them being the autonomy of women. This is, after all, a female planet – *the Mother Earth* – and, as such, a woman's ‘place’ is ‘wherever she wants to be’”(in Boice, 2007, p.40). She further explains that in her culture, women at menopause are honoured as wise guides of their communities, becoming clan mothers and wisdom keepers. Ussher, agrees with this and says that in some societies, specifically those that share a shamanic world-view, women at mid-life, having gone through the menopausal transition are viewed as important members of their communities (Ussher, 2006).

In Native American traditions, Shinoda Bolen (2015) notes that the on-set of menstruation and menopause are markers in the blood mysteries, and this relates women to the moon cycles and the divine feminine. Women in these traditions and other indigenous cultures, view menopause as a time when we retain the menstrual blood in our body, not to grow human life, but to become pregnant and grow wisdom. Menopause heralds a woman becoming an elder of their community, looked to for their wisdom and advice in community affairs. Shinoda Bolen

stresses that at midlife, it is useful for women to have a conscious engagement with the archetypes which may be present in their being. She defines archetypes as patterns or tendencies which are innate in the human psyche. Archetypes in women become activated due to different elements which intermingle, such as family and cultural circumstances, our inherited family traits and patterns, hormonal levels and the different stages of life we are navigating.

A different cultural perspective is offered by Tiwari (2011) who explains that in India, “Menopause is an oasis of lightness wedged between the phases of fertility and wisdom. Contrasted to the negative stereotypes surrounding menopause in the popular culture, the Vedic tradition honours all stages of a woman’s life” (p.202). Writing about women in her culture, she declares that:

The native women of my culture see this period [menopause] as a harbinger of deep spiritual fortitude, a time to start loosening the grip on competitive partnerships with the world and to go within to commune with the greater power...menopause marks the cusp of time when the physical essence of ojas [cellular immunity/spiritual energy] matures into emotional wisdom (p.206).

She goes on to note that in earlier cultures, before the advent of modern medicine and our longer lifespans, the mid-life crisis was unfamiliar. She tells us that all native cultures honoured women after their childbearing years were over. The Alaskan Upik and Australian Aborigines highlight the contribution and wisdom that menopausal and post-menopausal women bring to their communities. Tiwari (2011) also notes that in Judaism, when a woman stops having periods naturally, it is believed that the life force stays within her, in order for the quality of wisdom to emerge from her life experiences. She tells us that in the Hindu culture at around the age of 48, women and men of this age are celebrated with a special ceremony held in their honour, to mark this crucial rite of passage. Tiwari’s work points the way for me and others to view our transitions differently, honouring menopause, rather than dreading it (Kenton, 1998).

With regards to the spiritual importance of this transition, Tiwari (2011) asserts that “Although we may recognise menopause as a major physiological and psychological transition, we are yet to own its spiritual implications” (p.207). For me, to be able to move through my transition in a holistic way, it is vital that the spiritual implications of this transition are explored, as I have done in this dissertation.

I agree with Alleger (2004) who believes that the menopausal transition can be seen as a time of empowerment, through psychological and spiritual development. She says it is important to note that: “Many indigenous cultures recognized the wisdom of menopause; it was only upon entering menopause that women were ready to become the medicine women and shamans of their tribes” (p.151). She also notes that the menopausal transition is a time of contemplation and preparation for a new life phase, which can lead to feelings of confidence, renewed energy and empowerment.

Discussing alternative ways of viewing the menopause Michaud (2011) tells us that in other cultures, peri-menopause as the entry into the transition, gives women prominent positions within their communities. She notes this happens for Sikh women, and for the Yanomamo, forest people of Brazil and Venezuela. Postmenopausal women are revered and are powerful decision makers of their communities. It is the Bantua women of South Africa who purify their village of any illness or disease, and if there is war, they will ritually cleanse any weapons. Michaud (2011) also tells us that:

The Burunti people of Africa believe that the apex of womanhood is becoming a grandmother (Mercer, 1999). So too with the Hmong, where childbearing is prestigious, and menopausal women exercise increased authority. Older women are given the name, which translated means respected elder (Rice, 1995). It is also common in places such as Samoa, Korea, China, Japan, Lebanon, and Malaysia for postmenopausal women to attain a sort of sexual liberation that would not have been allowed in their younger years (Gutman, 1987, in Michaud, 2011, p.53).

Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Menopause – A Great Rite of Passage

“Surely there must be another way?”

By contrast, along with the literature pertaining to physical and emotional, psychological issues surrounding menopause, there is a slow, growing acknowledgement through research and personal engagement with the transition, that menopause deserves to be seen as an important rite of passage in a woman’s life (Baker, 2013).

The importance of personal development is reflected on by McQuaide (1997) who feels that from a psychological and spiritual perspective, women going through the menopausal transition can be called to engage in inner development in order to build their identity at midlife, find purpose and meaning for the second part of their lives. This accords with Greer’s (2018)

view that at menopause, women are urged to plan the rest of their lives, materially, psychologically and spiritually. This has been my experience. When I entered the perimenopausal stage of my transition, which coincided with the start of my EdD, I felt called to do inner personal development work, which has culminated in this research. McQuaide (1997) tells us that if women can engage with the transition from a spiritual and psychological perspective, they have a greater capacity to view the change in a more positive way, leading to self-acceptance and an expansion in their self-expression.

According to McQuaide (1997), the menopausal transition is socially constructed. She quotes Middleman & Wood (1995) who say that “There is no reality apart from one’s construction of it in dialogue with others, and there are as many constructions of reality as there are experiencing persons” (p. 8 in McQuaide, 1997, p.133). She tells us that the focus on the biological aspects of menopause as a woman’s experience at midlife, whilst omitting the psychological and spiritual facets of experience, has been this western culture’s construction of a woman’s midlife experience. This echoes my own understanding through this research, as revealed in my encounter with a nurse in the Prologue, and my own gut feeling that to view my transition through just one lens, negates the richness and fullness of myself as a menopausal woman.

A Change in Perspective

Viewing the change of life through western Euro-centric/north American cultural lenses, leads Greer to conclude that many women experience difficulties with the menopausal transition for two reasons: firstly, because of our cultural attitudes towards youth, older women and the aging process from a physical perspective; and secondly, because we have not honoured the process of being a woman and therefore are disconnected from our natural developmental cycles (Greer, 2018). We do not honour our changes. We hide the fact that we are aging by, for example, using hormone replacement therapy, or perhaps dying our hair, and we do not share our experiences with others. Thus we deprive ourselves of support and the opportunity to further our own growth potential (Orleane, 2010).

Menopause is an extremely importance event in a woman’s life and Orleane (2010) points out that “There is a reason Menopause has been named ‘The Change’. Perhaps we should emphasize *The* rather than *Change*, pointing out the momentous significance of stepping into all that we are as women and living our truth” (p.214). She maintains that menopause is a time

of wisdom where we can come into our own authenticity and my experience through the transition accords with her view.

An Opportunity for Growth

The importance of the psychological and spiritual aspects of menopause are discussed by Sharan, (1994), who notes that menopause is a stage of life when we can awaken to different aspects and important shifts in our life experience, which ask to be attended to and recognised during the transition, in order for integration of unresolved issues. She explains that for some women, menopause is a period when the psychological and emotional issues that have not been dealt with in the past, rise up to the surface to be cleared. It is this clearing process that, if we navigate it successfully, presents us with an opportunity to reach our full potential and to be able to offer the wisdom of our experiences to others. I feel Sharan (1994) makes an important point about midlife; that it is a time when women are on the brink of deepening their connection with themselves, and she describes menopause as “...an initiation, a transition and a unique experience for every woman” (p.17).

The Spiritual and Psychological Importance of the Menopausal Journey

Important and refreshing insights into conscious engagement with the menopausal transition also come from medical doctors King, Hunter and Harris (2005), who maintain that although many issues can collide during some women’s menopause, like physical changes, illness, stress and various psychological problems, menopause itself is a spiritual and psychological event in a woman’s life. For them, spirituality for women at mid-life can be significant and they observe that:

No matter a woman’s cultural background, her personal spirituality affects her views of herself and the world around her. More broadly, spirituality can be defined as beliefs that give transcendent meaning to one’s life. Menopause is a time that forces a woman to pause, to look at how her own beliefs have shaped the person she has become and perhaps the woman she would like to be (p.23).

They also note that the transition brings a change in perspective for some women and a search for meaning where they may ask, what is my purpose? What does this transition mean for me? They also stress through their work, the vital importance of women learning to nurture themselves through their menopausal years. Women need to understand the importance of learning to nourish themselves, by becoming their own care givers. By doing this, women are

more able to give care and attention to others, and as they say, “Being attentive to spiritual issues such as meaning, priorities, and long-term perspectives enables women to focus on the bigger picture and to value themselves enough to attend to their own health” (King et al. 2005, p.72).

They also discuss and cite the following research they feel is pertinent to women going through menopause who experience difficulties: McCullough, Fincham & Tsang, (2003) using their TRIM 12 item self-report measure, looked at participants’ abilities to move through psychological/physical transgressions, and the importance of three psychological parameters, forgiveness, forbearance and Time as part of the healing process. Their work indicated that there is a considerable link between spirituality and positive emotions. Those who attend to and have a spiritual practice are more likely to navigate their lives in ways that bring the qualities of peace, harmony and forgiveness more present in their lives; Dedert et al. (2004) carried out research measuring the stress levels of a sample of women with fibromyalgia, using the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL) and the Index of Core Spiritual Experiences (INSPIRIT), to discover whether a religious or spiritual practice aided them with their illness. Their work indicated that people who engage in spiritual or religious activities, experience lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol; and the work of Ironson et al. (2002), whose study regarding the reliability and validity of their own scale of measuring the effects of spirituality on stress levels in people living with HIV (The Ironson-Woods Spirituality/Religiousness (SR) Index), revealed that those who are in touch with spirituality, are more likely to have less over-reactive cortisol stress levels and are more able to deal with the stresses that life may bring. It is heartening that there is some quantitative research that highlights the importance of attending to one’s spiritual needs, which the three studies mentioned above show. However, these studies are more generalised towards illness or transgression, rather than focussed on menopausal women, although they do highlight a link between spiritual health and physical/emotional health.

Menopause can be a time of great anxiety for some women and King et al. (2005) comment that during the menopausal transition, women may be under increased stress due to physical, hormonal changes in their bodies and life issues which may be prevalent at this time. The above research indicates that placing our attention on our spiritual lives is associated with positive feelings and obviously better for our physical health. They also observe that it is important for women to be supported to learn more about this transition:

...menopause and the midlife transition period are often psychological and spiritual life events as well as physical and physiological events in women's lives...Cultural expectations about aging and appearance may have a profound effect on women's self-esteem during this period...However, learning more about menopause and the midlife transition can provide reassurance and let women know that their feelings, emotions, and strife during this period are normal (p.88).

Steffen (2011) conducted a study of 218 women from the Church of the Latter Day Saints, on spirituality and menopausal symptoms, through the administering of a 36 item questionnaire regarding different aspects of what the participants were experiencing, Steffen (2011) noted that during this period, spirituality offered aid for women to understand loss, become in touch with their spirituality on deeper levels and to find new life meaning through the transition. One of the constraints of this study is that it was focussed on one religious community which may have particular views on women's transitions and this was not explicit in the research. I also believe it would have been fruitful to have read some more of the participants' opinions rather than only their yes/no answers to the questions provided, which seemed limiting. Steffen expresses that Menopause is often a stressful time for women and that attending to one's personal spiritual life can offer much support during the transition (2011). I concur with this as my engagement through the retreats brought my spiritual life to the fore which has been key in my quest for understanding and meaning through menopause. I also deeply resonate with Greer's assertion regarding the importance of the ageing woman passing through menopause and reclaiming her spiritual power:

There is no point in growing old unless you can be a witch, and accumulate spiritual power in place of the political and economic power that has been denied you as a woman. Witches are descended from the sibyls and female saints; their lineage is noble and no woman should be ashamed to call herself a witch (Greer, 2018, p.8).

The Importance of Voice – Beyond the Silencing

In a study carried out using in-depth narrative interviews and thematic analysis, women were asked to describe their menopausal voices (Herzig, 2012). As a piece of qualitative research, this work was centred on the meanings menopausal women make of their abilities to communicate their experience through this transition, rather than on symptom measurement. Herzig (2012) notes that "Five key themes emerged from the study: The Voice of Wisdom, The Voice of Aging, The Voice of Relationship, The Voice of Spirit, and the Voice of

Knowledge” (p518). This is a refreshing and important study because it highlights the importance of women’s personal narratives of their menopausal experiences (as does my research). By challenging societal attitudes to menopause, this study aims to give women a forum to formulate their own understanding of their transitions. The constraints of this study are that we are not told how many women took part in it, and its focus on voice does not leave room for detailed discussion on physical symptoms that can cause difficulties, although psychological issues are discussed to some extent.

According to Herzig (2012) it is vital that women’s voices are heard as they embark on the menopausal transition. She declares that:

A menopausal woman’s voice is a metaphor for the self-contained part of a symphony or sonata that flows and connects one or more of the parts in harmony. Her voice becomes a manifestation of the essence of self and when listened to, breaks the silence of non-existence. A menopausal woman’s voice is a key to the identity of self. It is the voice that expresses the entirety of her existence at that particular stage in life (p.519).

I agree with Herzig that it is important for menopausal women to be able to voice their experiences, emotions, thoughts and ideas both to themselves and others. In this major transition, voice becomes key in order for women to be able to express their individuality and understanding of themselves as they grow through this life cycle. Herzig agrees with the assertions of Wilk & Kirk who suggest that the menopausal transition be seen as a model of development with the focus on psychological aspects of the transition (Wilk & Kirk, 1995, in Herzig, 2012).

I resonate with Herzig (2012) who expresses the importance of understanding the complexities of menopause. By doing so, we can then begin to understand women’s own interpretations of their individual change of life; how they self-identify; the meaning they make of their experiences and how they may interpret these meanings through the use of their voices. She elaborates this theme when she asserts that:

Both the internal and external influences such as a woman’s knowledge base of menopause, the status of relationships with herself, others and God, her reactions to her changing body during the aging process, and the status of her self-esteem all influence the psychological well-being of menopausal women (p.532).

Herzig believes that women must be encouraged to use their voices to express the physical, spiritual and emotional changes they experience through this transition. She notes that if women were encouraged to embrace their change and learn to understand the deeper psychological aspects of menopause, they would be able to harness the potential growth during this powerful change of life, fostering a more optimistic and constructive approach to this transition, which could lead to it becoming a passage that is celebrated as a natural cycle in a woman's life (Herzig, 2012). How heartening this view is for me to reflect on; parting the veils of silence surrounding menopause and encouraging women to be able to voice their experiences and be supported in that, has been key in my own research journey.

A Personal Journey

Describing her own personal menopausal journey, Scavarda (2007) says it was full of “Alchemical happenings – something in our brains, our bodies, and our consciousness, moves us forward” (in Boice, 2007, p.117). Another personal view of the change of life comes from Matthews (2007), a prolific author of books on spirituality and shamanism, who tells us that during her own transition she wrote poetry and expressed herself creatively in order to explore “...the strange fragmentation of meaning as menopause strikes. It is about finding the rhythm of creativity when the priorities are in a state of alteration” (in Boice, 2007, p.268).

Picard (2000) engaged in research using two in-depth narrative interviews with 17 midlife women, and one creative movement group with the participants. The purpose of the research was to explore expanding consciousness in midlife women. The study was based on Newman's theory of expanding consciousness and expanded Newman's method to include creative movement as a mode of expression. This was an engaging piece of research, which highlighted creativity and its power to facilitate growth – something that I discovered in my journey through menopause. What I also found innovative in this piece of research was the emphasis of movement as a way to portray narratives of the women who participated in the study, thus offering them creative ways of expression. Picard (2000) noted that the women in her study viewed their transition through menopause as a journey of personal discovery, which facilitated their deeper understanding of themselves and their experience through this important life stage. This fostered risk taking in the women involved in the research, exploring new career paths and going back to study. She also found that most of the women took time for themselves to honour their own creativity, by writing poetry, painting, taking up photography and making

music. This also led them to practising self-care strategies such as exercising, being in nature and making time for reflection.

One of the main aspects that Picard (2000) identified in this study was that the women found their relationship to the spiritual aspects of themselves as key to their transition. All expressed that this relationship with their spiritual life was "...intensely personal and an evolving process. At midlife, their experience of spirit has grown beyond their understanding as young adults and often included but also went beyond organized religious affiliations" (p.153).

The Season of Autumn as a symbol for the Menopausal Woman

Reflecting on the menopausal transition, Duckett (2010) believes that the season of autumn is the time in a woman's life where she takes stock and explores her psychological and spiritual life. She equates this time with midlife and the menopausal transition. During the transition, she says "...a woman grapples with a need to seek rest, reflection, contemplation, and resourcing for the next half of her life as she simultaneously contends with the life she has already created" (p.144).

As a rite of passage, Davis & Leonard (2012) see menopause as part of the circle of a woman's life and they note that "...menarche, birth and menopause are biological turning points as initiations for women, part of a psycho-spiritual lifecycle" (p.22).

The traditional pagan view of women's cycles is tripartite in nature and viewed as aspects of the Goddess archetype (Kenton, 1998; Shinoda Bolen, 2002). The first aspect of a woman's life is termed 'Maiden', indicating a young virgin woman who has not yet given birth; the second aspect is termed 'Mother', which heralds a woman's fertility; and 'Crone', a term used for women who are no longer fertile and are considered to be in the winter of life. Similarly to Duckett (2010), Davis & Leonard (2012) affirm the concept that there should be a new phase in a woman's cycle slotted in between the traditional pagan one of mother and crone: this, they term, the Matriarch. They believe that women moving through the peri-menopause, menopause and post menopause stage, from a spiritual perspective, have found it difficult to fit their lives into the traditional women's triple cycle of Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Maiden is linked to spring; Mother to summer; and Crone to winter. The Matriarch, they designate as autumn. This is a time when a woman moves into the stage of life signified by menopause, and this transition demands her attention be on herself rather than others she has cared for in her family. The Matriarch is on the journey to her own personal power. "...the Matriarch rekindles the passions and dreams of youth and may pick up broken threads of spiritual pursuits

with new intensity and direction” (p.28). They maintain that the Matriarch archetype has been absent from the Goddess trinity historically, due to the fact that in our biological lifecycle, the span of time between childbearing and old age has opened up considerably since ancient times. We live much longer and have many opportunities to be influential on a social and political stage. Their theme of the menopausal woman as being linked to autumn, reverberated throughout one shamanic retreat I undertook, where instead of this archetype being called the Matriarch, the retreat leaders defined the archetype as the Enchantress.

Importance of Groups for Menopausal Women

According to McQuaide (1998) the menopausal change of life can be a time of questing for meaning and transformation which can lead women to feel the need to work on their inner psychological and spiritual needs. She notes that “Women are at risk of having their search and transformation shaped by ageist and sexist images. Groups provide an ideal environment plus personal Counterculture in which to construct diversity-respecting images with which women can identify” (p.131).

Support from others is key to navigating the change of life and McQuaide (1998) also notes that women who come together in groups during their midlife and menopausal transitions, find strength in being able to share with others. They come to realise that they are not alone in their experiences. She says that as women see and experience each other’s strengths and vulnerability, they enter into dialogue with each other around what they perceive to be the life crisis of the change of life, and the opportunity to grow as individuals. In a group setting they are able to co-create and make new meanings for themselves in relation to their transitions.

Spirituality and Archetypes – Menopause as a Journey of Individuation

From a symbolic perspective, Pinkola Estes (2008), maintains that during menopause, it is archetypes such as the Wild Woman that can provide women with understanding of the transition and how to integrate the changes which happen to her on physical, psychological and spiritual levels into her life. Pinkola Estes suggests that during this period, there is an invisible force within that beckons and calls a woman to pursue her inner perceptive knowing and what she needs at this time in her life. The archetype of the Trickster supports and assists the Wild Woman archetype, presenting women with challenges and opportunities to expand and evolve during this important transition. In order to be able to fully access the archetype of the Wild Woman, the Trickster archetype compels women to complete and come to terms with their past issues during this transition.

My experience of researching menopause, and the silencing of the transition accords with Ammitzbøll's understanding that there is scant research available on women's individual reflection of their own experiences during menopause (Ammitzbøll, 1990). This results in ill-defined knowledge available as to what this rite of passage is like from the conscious perspective of women. She maintains that menopause is a natural passageway and rite of passage in all women's lives. She also believes that menopause urges many women to undergo a process of individuation. Ammitzbøll (1990) asserts that it is important that women traversing the menopausal life change take note of their dreams and use rituals and ceremony to facilitate their individual growth and transitions. These are key ways for women to understand their process on deeper levels. Through her research, using narrative interviews with 36 women, on their personal experiences of menopause, she discovered that women traversing this passage of the change of life identified that they were journeying through a cyclic pattern through their menopausal transition: the women in her study all underwent a separation phase, a stage of initiation, and a period where they felt they moved through a rebirth of their own understanding of their experience through the menopause. Interestingly this research discovered that the women all said they needed to be able to spend more time alone, reflecting without the distraction of everyday life. This was something that I realised at a stage in my research, when I decided to do a self-imposed retreat into woodlands for eight days, and to move away from routine in order to reflect on my work (Chapter 4.) Reporting on her participants' experiences, Ammitzbøll noted that all felt they had undergone personal growth leading to increased self-esteem and deeper connection to spirituality. This was because they were able to view their menopausal transition as part of their natural cycle of being female (Ammitzbøll, 1990).

The importance of viewing menopause as a transitional journey is emphasised by Bond (2010) who notes that the journeys some women face at midlife denote a time of prodigious change where priorities and the focus of life can shift. It is a journey that women can experience as transformational, bringing with it a renewed sense of self, resulting in life changes which are more in tune with this change of life. The menopausal midlife passage for women is an opportunity for personal growth and the journey of individuation. Bond notes that menopause can be viewed as a life crisis for many women and spiritually this presents an opportunity for transformation and development. I found this research to be deep and honouring of the narratives all participants shared. The spiritual and psychological aspects of all their journeys were explored in depth and were moving to read.

Keeran (2006) undertook research highlighting the individuation experience of midlife women transitioning menopause. Using a phenomenological heuristic approach, to capture five women's lived experience, Keeran maintains that the experience of individuation is an exploration of reconnection with the 'Self' which Carl Jung defined as the archetypal image of completeness which we, as humans, endeavour to attain (Jung, 1989, in Keeran, 2006). She asserts it is important to understand the context of women's lives from a social, cultural and historical perspective, which has traditionally impeded self-discovery and growth of women's consciousness during the midlife transition. My own research experience supports Keeran's understanding through her research that for many women going through the transition, loss, grief, depression, loneliness, struggle as well as spiritual engagement, turning points and synchronicity were important themes that the menopausal woman travels through on her journey. This research was in-depth and all the women's narratives were documented in order to capture the spirit of experience and give glimpses into the participants' personal lives. As a piece of research it was rich and nuanced showing the importance of the individuation process at menopause.

Howell (2001) puts forward a psychosocial paradigm which views midlife and menopause from a spiritual perspective. She also discusses the Jungian process of individuation which occurs around the midlife period, a time when we are called to go within ourselves, explore our personal issues and come to a place of personal power through our understanding and ability to make meaning of the transition. She says that it is important for us to re-imagine ourselves as women who are able to construct our own narratives, rather than to fit in to other's perceptions of what a menopausal woman is.

Similar to the work of Keeran (2006), Howell (2001) found in her study on spirituality and women's midlife development, that one of the main aspects that the women in her work were dealing with, was grieving loss. Howell conducted group process work and then used grounded theory to pull out the themes that emerged from the groups. She noted that emotions such as sadness, confusion and loneliness were prevalent and this motivated the women in her study to undertake their own self-exploration process, through prayer, enforced periods of solitude, and self-nurture. "As time passed and losses accumulated, the grieving process became a more general spiritual process, and the women became increasingly aware of their unique personal values" (p.53). This research afforded space for the importance of grief, a crucial aspect of transition during menopause to be seen and witnessed through the study, which I feel is an important aspect of this transition. Keeran's research centred on two specific groups of women,

a group of black women and a group of lesbian/bisexual women. Whilst the author mentions she did a previous study in the same year with Caucasian women, and that minorities were underrepresented in that study, it would have been interesting if she had had a group who were mixed to see what might have evolved, and whether her findings would be consistent between all groups.

Celebrating the Transition as a Rite of Passage

The menopausal transition is an opportunity for development and growth and Evans (2008) asserts that we need to encourage women to look within themselves and see the beauty and worth of all the life experience they have so far, that this is a passage to wisdom and as such should be celebrated. Evans explains that “The midlife transition is a doorway to a wonderfully liberating and exciting new part of life. It is important that women embrace it fully!” (p.97)

Similarly, Fogel (1998) talks of the Menopausal transition as a gateway between endings and beginnings. A way to come to terms with this rite of passage is through creative expression and ceremony or ritual. This, she says, empowers women to welcome the transition as a celebration of life.

Michaud (2011) carried out research with 24 postmenopausal women to discover their experiences from menstruation through menopause, using narrative interviewing and thematic analysis. The study highlighted the following themes that all the women in the research shared: silencing of their transition from a cultural perspective; wanting to have more information on the change of life and what it entailed on a mind, body and spiritual level; and being drawn to other women in groups, going through menopause, thus being able to share their process and supporting each other in empowering themselves, accessing their voices and having a platform to be heard and cultivating the wisdom of their life experience thus far. For these women, menopause was seen as a transitional phase of a woman’s life journey. They viewed their menopausal transition as “...analogous to the cycles of nature and seasons of the year, that gave rise to a helical model of women’s development from menstruation through menopause, and beyond” (p. iv).

According to Michaud, transpersonal psychology extends traditional psychological perspectives because it acknowledges the whole of a human being’s development, including that which is not identified with personality; as such it embraces spirituality and the development of consciousness (Michaud, 2011). One of the main aspects of the transpersonal approach to psychotherapy and psychology is that it investigates the mind/body relationship

and how this influences a person's psychological and spiritual growth. Because of this, any research on the menopausal transition which does not take into account or explore the mind/body continuum and its effects on women's spiritual growth, overlooks an important part of a woman's life experience, thus only presenting a fraction of the bigger picture of the transition.

The importance of spirituality is emphasised by Portenier (2018) as it can create a feeling of wellbeing, which is a significant factor for women going through the midlife and menopausal transition. She maintains that spirituality is linked to creativity and during midlife transitions, we can discover the healing benefits of giving our inner lives creative expression. This in turn can lead to integration for the menopausal woman. She notes also that creative expression is key to a successful negotiation of the menopausal and midlife transition; engaging in creative activities, such as poetry and art can have beneficial effects on health, producing feelings of wellbeing, which facilitate healing. Becoming in touch with creativity has the potential to increase a woman's quality of life through her menopausal journey.

In affirming the importance of the menopausal rite of passage, Fogel (1998) tells us that

In ancient times menopausal women were the wise grandmothers of their tribe, their blood stored in their body, like the wisdom stored in their psyches. Although the blood has ceased its monthly flow, it becomes instead 'wiseblood' - the older woman's body of knowledge. Traditionally, she now takes on the role of initiator, she whose womb is a storehouse of accumulated power, a vessel which has lost none of its sacredness. This is her task and the female wisdom and experience she imparts is both her and our grace" (pp.1-2).

Following on from this, Schierse-Leonard asserts that once women have traversed their menopausal passage, "The aging sibyl...transcends her individual ego desires and emphasises the importance of sharing her wisdom with the community (in Fogel, 1998, p.2).

Fogel (1998) establishes a link between adolescence and menopause, and maintains that the themes which arise in adolescence, will re-emerge during the menopausal transition and that any inner processes which have not been completed, will often re-emerge during the transition demanding our attention. She asserts that "Surges of creative energy, forsaken desires and wild dreams rise up with the spontaneous, energetic fire of the 'hot flushes'" (p.2).

Woodman (1985) explains that:

During this period (of menopause) the forsaken body has to be claimed, cherished, inhabited before it surrenders to becoming a vessel for creativity. In this situation, it is often difficult to distinguish the adolescent from the menopausal woman, but careful differentiation of the two phases of lunar consciousness will help her to her own life, instead of bitterly yearning for what is in fact hers for the claiming” (in Fogel, 1998, p.2).

An interesting spiritual view of some of the physical issues that menopausal women may find, is also discussed by Fogel (1998) who claims that in Western allopathic medicine, hot flushes are seen as a problem in need of treatment. However, in traditional Eastern spirituality, this is seen as

...the release of Kundalini - a creative, sexual-spiritual energy that is meant to rise up the spine, activating the various chakras along the way. Seen this way, hot flushes can be experienced as a powerful transformative energy, the creative fire that can be channelled and redirected. Hot flushes are also a means for the body to rid itself of toxins, with the release of heat and sweat (p.3).

Part of our menopausal transition is to face our anger at ageing. We need to accept and acknowledge our fears around our changing body (Fogel, 1998). Fogel quotes Schierse Leonard who asserts that:

As a woman passes through menopause, Nature forces her to confront her Madwoman. If she fails to confront directly her anger at ageing, she is likely to become bitter and resentful. She may be jealous of her daughter’s youth and deflate her enthusiasm or try to compete with her. Or she may become depressed, ageing even faster, dwindling away without sharing her wisdom. But if she can accept the mad crone within her - the inner Hecate who sits at the crossroads of life and death – she can share with us her own unique perspective and oracular wisdom (in Fogel, 1998, p.3).

I take this as a menopausal woman who has difficulty navigating the transition, being called to dialogue with herself, befriending the mad crone within her, in order to transform and embrace the archetype of the wise healer.

I end this review of literature with words which hold a promise of hope and transformation for me: Menopause is “...an exciting developmental stage – one that, when participated in consciously, holds enormous promise for transforming and healing our bodies, minds, and spirits at the deepest levels” (Northrup, 2010, p.31).

Conclusion

In order to ground my understanding of the quest for what my menopausal change means for me, it was important to give as comprehensive a review as possible of the academic literature pertaining to my topic. Reviewing this literature enabled me to shine a psychological and spiritual light on meanings attributed to menopause. It was my intention to present information and insights from authors who have undertaken research on menopause from different angles. This literature review offered studies that view the menopausal transition through physical, psychological and spiritual lenses, as well as from different cultural perspectives.

Much of the academic literature on menopause, comes from the biomedical field (Sievert, 2006), and it has been challenging to find studies pertaining to the psychological and spiritual implications of menopause. However, what I was able to uncover, gave me enormous hope for my own exploration. There is a growing body of research that disputes the prevalent medical view that menopause is a deficiency disease in need of a cure (Boice, 2007; Herzig, 2012; Kenton, 1998; Mackie, 1997). I was able to uncover a number of studies that viewed the menopausal transition as being a complex time in a woman's life, and therefore women's care at this time should be holistic and not compartmentalised. All these studies emphasised that it is important that equal attention is paid to the spiritual and psychological aspects of this rite of passage, and not just the physical issues that women may suffer from (Chrisler, 2007; Evans, 2008; Olchowska-Kotala). It has been heartening for me to uncover work that looks at the ways that menopause is viewed in different cultural contexts, where women who are going through the transition are viewed as important members of their communities, with much to offer through their life experience (Boice, 2007; Shinoda Bolen, 2015; Tiwari, 2011). These inspiring studies have confirmed an inner call that has led me to using the advanced training in psychotherapy and the retreats, which were all underpinned by different cultural belief systems, in order to research my own process through my transition.

Chapter 3: Setting out on a Great Adventure

Introduction

This chapter sets out my methodological approach to the research and the methods I used for collecting personal material. The background of the traditions of the retreats and advanced psychotherapy training are examined. The reasons for choosing these ways of eliciting personal material collected through these processes are laid out. I go on to evaluate the methodologies of Autoethnography and Writing as Inquiry: the first as the vehicle I chose to write and represent my explorations and growing understanding of my self-narratives; the second was a creative process of unfolding which emerged through writing and gave birth to new understandings and insights around my transition. I look at what these methodologies are, why they are useful to me, where I position myself philosophically in the research, and some of the criticisms which have been levelled at these approaches. Finally this chapter concludes with a comprehensive discussion and exploration of the ethical considerations and complexities of doing personal research.

Moving into my Research

Some background

In the last 30 years, a number of anthropologists such as Michael Harner, Neville Drury, and Alberto Villoldo, as well as psychologist Leo Rutherford have popularised the shamanic world view in western culture, and created their own training establishments which teach the practices and rituals of the peoples they studied through their own research (von Stuckrad, 2002). They have all entered into long term field work, living among different tribal peoples, participating in the life of the communities and learning about the practices, traditions and spiritual beliefs from shamans and tribal elders (Drury, 2012; Harner, 1990; Rutherford, 2008; Villoldo, 2006). This has led them to offer the teachings they received, to others in the west (i.e. North America, and Europe). The proliferation of shamanic workshops, trainings and retreats that I have encountered in the last twenty years, have served to enable me to view myself and my life from different perspectives.

Because of my previous experiences with shamanic and Sufi retreats, as well as exposure during my diploma training in psychotherapy to Sufi spirituality, I felt that these pursuits could offer me an opportunity to engage in finding deeper meaning and understanding of my

menopausal journey. I therefore chose to participate in the following ways for this particular research: an advanced training in psychotherapy; two all-female shamanic retreats; and a silent Sufi retreat. During these processes, I was aware that I was not only observing and entering into dialogue with myself around my topic; I was also encountering other people who were members of the different groups, specifically other women, from a social and cultural perspective, in my quest to investigate other ways of transitioning mid-life that honour the spiritual and psychological aspects of those who move through it (Shinoda Bolen, 2007).

Whilst the shamanic retreats were experiential and the advanced training included academic and experiential components, all have a tradition and an approach behind them. All the facilitators who have created these processes have spent time learning the rituals and techniques of their work from different indigenous communities in the field, and subsequently developed practices that people in the west can learn, in order to use these teachings as a process for self-discovery and healing (Hamilton, 2014; Rutherford, 2008). They all come from the premise that the eternal spiritual and shamanic traditions have always been the healing medicine for people in the communities where they have been practised (Walsh, 2007). Krippner (2007) notes that, “Shamans were humankind’s first psychotherapists, first physicians, first magicians, first performing artists, first storytellers, and even the first weather forecasters” (p.16). The facilitators of these retreat processes use this knowledge to offer different ways of healing and transformation.

Each retreat blends shamanic or spiritual practices with psychotherapeutic theories as follows:

- An advanced training in psychotherapy, which includes Jungian alchemy and the spiritual insights of the Sufi mystic, Ibn Arabi (January 2017 – November 2018). The first year is designed to use the stages and operations of medieval alchemy as a transformational psychic process, proposed by Carl Jung, in an experiential weekly group (Edinger, 1994; Marlan, 2005). The second year concentrates on the creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi (Corbin, 1998; Hirtenstein, 1999).
- A silent Sufi alchemical retreat, which forms part of the advanced psychotherapy training (a five day group retreat), combining various spiritual practices from the mystical traditions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity with Jungian alchemical processes (Hamilton, 2014).

- A retreat focusing on the archetype of the Enchantress as a symbol for the menopausal woman, utilising Jungian archetype work, shamanic journeying and shamanic rites of passage and ceremonies from the Native American Culture (Gunn Allen, 1992; Pinkola Estes, 2008; Shinoda Bolen, 2007; Sicurella, 2013); and
- A retreat focusing on the rites of passage of women at mid-life through the Matridonal journey, utilising a group of homeopathic medicines, specifically created for women. This retreat also includes spiritual practices, shamanic journeying, periods of silence and ceremonies from the Native American Culture (Gunn Allen, 1992; Pinkola Estes, 2008; Shinoda Bolen, 2007; Sicurella, 2013).

This marriage of shamanic and spiritual practices with psychological theoretical work builds a bridge between these two paradigms and as anthropologist and psychiatrist Roger Walsh (2007) notes:

Most scientific studies of shamanism have been by anthropologists. This is hardly surprising, for it is the anthropologists who have braved everything from arctic winters to tropical jungles to observe native shamans at work. However, several other disciplines, and especially psychology, can complement and enrich anthropological contributions. And, of course, the study of shamanism also has much to contribute to psychology (p.51).

Autoethnography – Narrating Myself

Through my research journey, it was vital that I was able to document my own experiences, as I travelled through the terrain of my quest for meaning through the spiritual and psychological aspects of the menopausal transition. My work focussed on writing about different cultural indigenous spiritual practices that have been adapted for a UK, Europe and USA audience. I am a woman in which east meets west; my mother was Italian and my father Bangladeshi. I grew up with this rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual ways, as well as being steeped in British culture. The exploration of other cultural beliefs and values is a natural journey for me. The different processes I engaged with, required a way of being able to portray my journey throughout the research, so that the different positions I moved through in my experiences could be honoured. It was the methodology of autoethnography that I turned to in order to explain the writing of my self-narratives.

Autoethnography provides me with a way of narrating the story of the Self in a cultural sense, as part of a cultural collective. I am witness to the stories that others may bring through the retreats and advanced psychotherapy training processes we engage in together; I am also a participant and co-creator of existing stories and new transformational narratives of the self that may emerge from this research. The objective of each retreat and training process was to help people to understand their own psychological and spiritual development, as they travel through their personal life transitions (Hamilton, 2014). In order to do this, each facilitated participants to re-make their existing stories and to open to new ways of storying the Self. All were focused on the same object which is women's rites of passage and/or life transitions. For me, the object was menopause and myself.

At points in the research I wrote autoethnographic texts that presented my own experiences through my interaction with others as a British woman, stepping into different ways of viewing the menopausal transition, and how this informs my own process with the topic (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography lent itself to my research with the different retreats and workshops mentioned above, which are all process oriented, and as Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) say:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience... A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (p.1).

What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography grew out of ethnography, a method often used by anthropologists, which studies phenomena in a particular culture, through observing people and customs (Etherington, 2004). This extension of the methodology of ethnography is generally advanced through a method of writing that involves the author drawing on their own lived experiences, in a way that connects the personal to the cultural and places the self and others within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). As a process autoethnography lies between autobiography (writing about one's life) and ethnography (writing to study culture), using the 'I' position embedded in 'auto' where the researcher's life becomes the main focus of the work. Ellis and Bochner (2000) note that in successful autoethnographies,

The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into a world of experience

different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered (in Riessman, 2008, p.192).

The use of autoethnography provides a way of writing that records our existence, which is perpetually in a state of transition and fluctuation. The act itself creates "...moments of clarity, connection and change" (Holman Jones, 2005, p.764). Autoethnographic writing enables researchers' personal stories to be written through social and cultural lenses and voiced as being legitimate research in the field (Speedy, 2008).

Ellis notes that the goal of autoethnography is to write about issues that evoke emotional responses, which may make a difference and are written from an ethical perspective of care and concern for those involved (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography seeks to evoke this type of feeling because a person's self is constructed in relation to the context of what is being researched. It is our stories that help us, as humans to create, understand and so become a force of change in all areas of our lives, from the personal to the social, cultural and political (Holman Jones, 2005).

Holman Jones adds that emotions are the key to understanding connections between self, power and culture. Emotions are particularly important in my research as often, women going through the menopausal transition find that their emotions become more heightened at this time in their lives (Shinoda Bolen, 2007). To some extent emotions are documented in the medical literature, which treats emotional imbalances as caused by hormonal changes that take place for women moving through peri-menopause, menopause to the post menopause period of their lives (Kenton, 1998). This is not the whole story, because from a psychological perspective, our emotions and the way we express them are fundamental to our wellbeing; positive emotions can enhance the experience of our lives and negative emotions can cause damage to us if they are not acknowledged or worked with (Cortwright, 1997). Autoethnography allows for this valuable aspect of human experience to be transparent in the research and it can become a powerful transformative vehicle for the researcher (Spry, 2001). Tami Spry's experience of the power of using autoethnography to evolve her understanding and knowledge of her own explorations led her to revealing that "For me, performing autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally" (Spry, 2001, p.708).

In autoethnography, the researcher becomes the subject of the study, using self-revelation in creative ways and reflexivity is a crucial part of the process (Etherington, 2004). Reflexivity is a way for the researcher to engage in a process of acquiring new understandings of their work by reflecting on what they experience and being open to further insights which may emerge from their research (Finlay, 2008). It was a call for me to question my engagement and participation in the research, through a critical and mindful lens so that I was able to be fully present with all aspects of my study. The evolving narrative contained in an autoethnography is not finite or fixed; it is the actual process of allowing words to pour onto the page, that not only evolves the individual personally, but adds to and affects collective understanding of the topic in question, thus challenging the grand narratives so prevalent in quantitative scientific reporting (Speedy, 2008). It has become a means of continual evolution and remaking of the self. As Keen (1998) explains in the process of writing “We need to reinvent ourselves continually, weaving new themes in our life narratives, remembering our past, revisiting our future, reauthorizing the myth by which we live” (in Hoyt, 2000, p.66). Autoethnographies demand that attention is paid to the liminal spaces of that which is being created (Speedy, 2008). These spaces are the pure potentiality of new growth, or seeds that have not yet germinated.

Through this research, I have been challenged to be open to my own process and understanding of what it means for me to be a menopausal woman; how this shifts itself on a daily level, and how, by attending to my own psychological and spiritual needs at this time may provide opportunities to traverse this transition in positive ways. Although I understand that researchers writing autoethnography, often position themselves in the philosophical territory of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Speedy, 2008), it is the transpersonal paradigm that underpins my research. As expressed by Braud and Anderson (1998), variegated human experiences cannot be addressed through the approaches of the conventional objective scientific paradigm. In their view these experiences can lead to transcendent realities beyond our limited ego mind, enabling us to find our authentic selves. This philosophical stance acknowledges and articulates experiences of a transcendent nature that is beyond the normal boundaries of consciousness (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). Washburn (1995) defines this paradigm as “...a synthesis of spiritual and psychological perspectives” (p.ix). Wilber (2000) defines it as personal knowing which arises from the lived experience of the interaction between a person’s inner and outer worlds, within a unifying paradigm of wholeness that includes “Not just matter, lifeless and insentient, but the living Totality of matter, body, mind,

soul and spirit” (p.xi). I have drawn on elements of various spiritual traditions, which are informed by very different ways of seeing the world. Being exposed to these other ways, has enabled me to be in a continuous process of learning about myself as I changed through my menopausal transition, on an inner level, as well as deriving new understandings about myself in relation to other people I encountered during my research.

Criticisms of Autoethnography

Much criticism has been levelled at those who use autoethnography in their research. Critics claim that it promotes solipsism and narcissism in the researcher and that it is a platform that encourages self-indulgence (Etherington, 2004). Roth notes that in a positive light, autoethnography is a kind of therapy and in a negative vein it can be a form of narcissism (Roth, 2009). The term ‘self-indulgent’ is one that is frequently applied to autoethnographic work (Sparkes, 2002). This troubles many academics, both from an ethical and responsibility point of view. Maguire (2006) remarks that Coffey (1999, in Maguire, 2006) sees autoethnography as self-indulgent and limiting in its inquiry of first person research which has no bearing on a wider audience. Sparkes’ (2002) opinion is that the term ‘self-indulgent’ is often misapplied to this methodology. Rather than being work in which researchers may wallow in their own personal material, autoethnographies provide an opportunity to understand the personal in relation to the culture of the researcher. He also makes the point that any work which is performed, including writing autoethnography, is always going to be embedded in relationship with others we have known in our lives and shaped by the culture we grow up in.

Another criticism levelled at autoethnography is centred on how the work is read and received (Sparkes, 2002). Whilst autoethnography can become a witness for both the reader and the author, it offers a testimony of truth that is generally not accepted or is concealed. This testimony may be criticised for revealing something that has been hidden because it may cause issues for those reading it. Sparkes (2002) goes on to say that “Witnessing is never a solitary act, and it always implies a relationship” (p.98). This has been an important point of reflection for me during the writing and presentation of my personal material in Chapters 4 and 5.

The issue of boundaries is also an area where criticism is directed as in autoethnography they are blurred and constantly crossed (Speedy, 2008), which can cause controversy and have ethical implications, such as how others are represented in our work. As the author of an autoethnography featured in this dissertation, it has been challenging to write in ways that honour myself, those that I encountered through the research as well as the reader. It is only

through self-reflexivity (Etherington, 2004), self-knowing, self-respect, self-sacrifice and self-luminosity (Sparkes, 2002) that I have become conscious and mindful of whether the writing crossed boundaries, such as revealing personal material which might implicate myself or others in my narrative in harmful ways. I am also aware that people who may read my work might not have experienced this transition, nor any of the issues that emerged for me. Thus I am mindful that the reader could be alienated and be unable to connect with this research because of its personal nature.

Delamont argues that the role of a researcher is to shed light on the lives of others, rather than their own (2009). According to Delamont, social scientists have a duty to be objective and concentrate on those that are being studied, and she believes that a researcher's experiences are not worthy of research. She argues that "...autoethnography cannot meet core social science objectives" (p.59). Further, she believes that autoethnography is ethically flawed and cites autoethnographies where informed consent was obviously not given for representations by authors (Clough, 1992, 2002; Ronai, 1996 in Delamont, 2009). However, I believe that Delamont's criticism does not take into account the relevance of the researcher's voice to document understanding and meaning in a cultural sense, as part of a cultural collective. (Speedy, 2008). As an integrative psychotherapist, working with humanistic approaches, congruence and appropriate self-disclosure is an important aspect of building the therapeutic alliance (Etherington, 2004). In this dissertation I believe my use of autoethnography contributes to building a holistic view of the menopausal transition, and I resonate with Etherington's view that autoethnography is aptly suited to research in my profession: as all women going through menopause do so in highly unique ways, it is important for individual unique experiences to be documented.

Much of the criticisms levelled at autoethnography, come from the scientific establishment which is not used to evaluating personal writing. The criteria for judging this type of work are difficult, unlike the long established criteria of evaluating conventional scientific research that are considered to be more 'rigorous' (Sparkes, 2002). Autoethnography, because of its personal nature, is considered by some to be unsafe, however, there are criteria that can be used to evaluate it and I discuss a couple of templates put forward by two authors below, taken from Sparkes (2018, p2).

Richardson (2005) offers a set of Creative Analytical Processes (CAP) to guide the evaluation of autoethnographic writing as follows:

- (1) *Substantive Contribution*: is the text a credible piece which adds to our understanding of social life?
- (2) *Aesthetic Merit*: is the text appealing, crafted, creative and interesting to the reader?
- (3) *Reflexivity*: does the text show us the researcher's process and make this explicit?
- (4) *Impact*: does the piece affect the reader on some level – emotionally, intellectually?
- (5) *Expression of Reality*: does the work represent embodied lived experience which provides insight and gives a plausibly real account of the research entered into?

Stacy Holman Jones (2005) offers the following criteria which she looks for when evaluating autoethnography and prefixes each point with “Autoethnography is...” as follows:

- Participation as reciprocity;
- Partiality, reflexivity, and citationality as strategies for dialogue (not mastery);
- Dialogue as a space of debate and negotiation;
- Personal narrative and storytelling as an obligation to critique;
- Evocation and emotion as incitements to action;
- Engaged embodiment as a condition for change.

I think it is important to be clear that the lists of criteria presented by Richardson (2005) and Holman Jones (2005) are not exhaustive, and they are a starting point. Holman Jones points out with her own criteria which she uses to evaluate her own and other people's autoethnographies, that they are shifting and altering as the text is engaged with. Whilst lists of criteria can be seen as prescriptive, with any qualitative work, they must be flexible depending on the texts produced. Both of the lists above that I have outlined share commonalities: both emphasise that the text is relational between the writer and reader; both emphasise the importance of whether the text moves the reader in some way, or provokes a response; and both include the significance of the text being read, as giving an embodied sense of living. Holman Jones also includes the importance of the text as a means for the stimulation to take action, and to foster change in some way.

Movement through Text – Writing as Inquiry

Writing as the Connective Tissue in this Research

I used writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2005; St. Pierre, 2005) to present my own and different views and perspectives on menopause. The keeping of personal reflection

journals, dream diaries and transcribing notes when I was engaged in the various phases of my research, allowed the depth of material around the menopausal transition to evolve through my experiences and the writing process. Through autoethnography, my voice became present, and by using different experimental writing practices such as poetry, creative non-fiction or fiction techniques (Sparkes, 2002), I had the opportunity through experimentation to allow my texts to develop and change as I dropped deeper into this research.

A Different way to Write Research

For the creation and fashioning of experimental texts which formed my autoethnography, the methodology of writing as inquiry challenged preconceptions I had about my topic. For St. Pierre (2005), by using this method as Richardson proposes, "...writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery" (p.967). The method itself invites us to flee from meaning. Fleeing from the constraints of societal and cultural norms of what is acceptable and what is not. St. Pierre feels it is important that we question the parameters we have imposed on the idea of what writing might mean. Writing as a method of inquiry asks us to step into forbidden territory and to enter into the dangers of collapsing what we think to be so, in order to open in a spirit of inquiry into what may be (St. Pierre, 2005).

Richardson notes that what we study is not separate from us, rather it is intertwined with our lives and therefore experimental methods such as writing as inquiry encourage us to write narratives which place us in different areas of our lives, thus freeing us from confining ourselves to one aspect. The texts produced in this way "...evoke new questions about the self and the subject...They can evoke deeper parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance the sense of self – or even alter one's sense of identity" (Richardson, 2005, p.965). The vehicle of using writing as inquiry as a method of research can be the medium through which expression may be launched and it encapsulates a "... trajectory... a line of flight" (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977/1987, p.125, in St. Pierre, 2005, p.967), fleeing from science writing to experimental, creative text. In this way, as St. Pierre highlights, it is this nomadic wandering which is a crucial aspect of writing as inquiry as a method of research, having the potential to access the liminal spaces of the writer encouraging deep exploration of that which is below the surface of everyday existence (Speedy, 2008). Writing as inquiry differs from autoethnography in that it was the medium through which I was able to create various representations of my experiences as clearly as I possibly could. It offered me a way to craft what emerged through me as a result of my menopausal journey, through the act of writing and re-present my encounters with the

topic in different forms, such as poetry and prose. Autoethnography was the means by which I scrutinised my personal experiences as the person at the centre of this research, drawing on my own lived experience of my menopausal transition (Speedy, 2008). Writing as inquiry provided a way for me to make meaning and develop understanding of my personal process.

The exemplar of Hélène Cixous

The approach of writing as inquiry for producing research texts is beautifully illustrated through the work of Hélène Cixous and in particular, *The Writing Notebooks* (2004), a collection of notes and pages extracted from her various personal notebooks. Hélène Cixous is a professor, French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician. She is a controversial figure, whose work attracts much criticism. Whilst many have praised her endeavour to slice away traditional attitudes to women and writing, she has often been accused of contradictions in her work, which arouse confusion (Nordquist, 1996).

The material which the editor Susan Sellers has gathered into *The Writing Notebooks*, crosses the whole range of Helene Cixous' output from her plays, criticism, fiction and poetry. I take the inspiration for the way I approached the writing of my research from the writing processes that are shown in the *Writing Notebooks*.

This collection of personal slivers of her writing, shows the progression of her ideas and the transparency of the process she engages in with the act of writing. Sellers gives examples of where and how ideas come to Cixous and how these evolve. We are shown the various stages her writings go through, from the initial jottings and ideas, written down on whatever paper she has to hand, and the process of refinement which takes place many times before something becomes a finished piece. This book gave me great insight into the processes of writing and evolving texts. Sellers (2004) notes:

If there is one consistent thread through the many and multifarious works Cixous has produced, including her works of criticism and essays on writing, it is this belief in writing's ability to take us beyond the limitations of the self to a terrain where other understandings and perspectives come into view (p.viii).

Cixous is deeply engaged in the process of receiving inspiration through language, seeing the ideas and insights that flash into her mind as continuous joyful coincidences, prompting her to engage with myriad events, ideas, feelings and memories, which all come through words and are then written in her various notebooks. Thus she keeps everything that emerges from this

process of receptivity, and these form the foundations for her inspiration to excavate when she comes to writing her different texts. The act of writing is in itself a transformational process for Cixous.

Dreams play an important part in Cixous's process of writing and she tells us that "My dreams are written in ritual ways..." (Cixous, 2004, p.118). She writes them as dictated by the dream she has experienced in a particular journal notebook for that purpose, and before she writes something else, the dreams are read as a prompt for ideas, analysis, inspiration, and insights. This is the ritual she speaks of, where connections are made and ideas are seeded.

I am also curious that in this collection of pages from Cixous' notebooks, each entry is written by hand, and not on a computer. This feels like an embodied, feminine way of creating, where Cixous has no plan as to what she will write, but instead acts on feelings that arise in her being which she trusts, and then transcribes what emerges by hand. Cixous (2004) believes writing to be "A corporeal act, involving memories and knowledge of the writer's body, and partly from recognition of the fragile intuitive nature of the writer's quest for truth" (p.x).

How I engaged with Writing as Inquiry

Taking my cue from Helene Cixous's ways of working to produce texts that emerged from my conscious engagement with menopause, all my work was written initially by hand in research diaries and journals specific to each retreat and the advanced psychotherapy group training. My work was then typed up, so that I was able to experiment with the texts produced through layout and style. This secondary writing process also allowed for the ideas and impressions recorded in the hand written notebooks to be further explored. I also kept a dream diary, as according to Jung and Freud, as well as in the transpersonal modality that I have been trained in as a psychotherapist, dreams provide entry into the unconscious world of the psyche. These became another way for me to access insights around my research topic (Jacobs, 2004; Hamilton, 2014). I kept a blank notebook in order to record dreams and to draw any symbols that may have been present. This became a potent way to use my creative imagination to elicit different aspects around the research and my personal process through it (Progroff, 1992).

Richardson (2005) gives the researcher some writing practices to facilitate consciously using writing as a method of inquiry. I engaged in some exercises as and when they felt right for me to do so during the research and writing up period. One of her exercises that I drew on, was number 11, whereby the writer experiments with raw material, writing it in three different ways, such as a play script, a prose representation and a poetic representation.

Other ways I engaged with writing to bring out different perspectives within me around the material I collected, were through meditation techniques of silent breathing for ten minutes before I started the writing process, to calm and be consciously present to the act of writing. Then using the technique of Freewriting before each session, I wrote rapidly by hand without pause or edit or thinking for a period of ten minutes. These techniques enabled my conscious mind to be bypassed in order for the creative imagination to be free to emerge (Millin, 2009).

All thoughts, feelings, emotions and transitory ideas were written in different journals, and when I was away from my home, I had a permanent notebook which I carried everywhere with me, to catch any fleeting thoughts or images which arose. For me, writing is a spiralling practice, involving a process of involution and evolution. I agree with Millin (2009) who believes that:

Women tend to explore meaning in a circular pattern – meaning that their writing and talking begins on one level and spirals inward to what really matters. Many factors determine whether and where the spiral begins and how deep it goes: time, mood, prompt and safety are some of the variables (p.59).

Some Criticisms of Writing as Inquiry

Whilst some qualitative researchers understand and acknowledge the benefits of using writing as inquiry, there are those who are critical of using this method in social science reporting. The issue does not seem to revolve around using writing as a tool to evolve and shape research, through a process of refinement in the way that St. Pierre uses it (2005), but rather in how it is re-presented in its final form. One such critic is Michael Schwalbe who has criticised the use of poetry and fiction to represent research, aiming his arguments at Laurel Richardson in particular. He argues that there are some moral aims and responsibilities of sociological research, and that these cannot be met by writing poetry (Schwalbe, 1995).

In particular, he asserts that researchers need to make themselves understood to the largest audience possible; they must be explicit and clear in their writing, so that transparency of the process and accountability of the research can be seen; and that analysis is a thought process and not something that occurs in the text as Richardson argues. Whilst I do agree on some level with this assertion, from my own experience documented in this dissertation, transparency often only emerged through the texts which I produced. Richardson (2005) believes that creative ethnographies which push and blur boundaries of research reporting by using such vehicles as poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction, can be evaluated through Creative

Analytical Processes (as outlined on page 52). By applying these five levels to the reading of texts, it is possible to extend and reflect on the merits of reporting creative research. Writing as Inquiry can take a number of different forms, when it is re-presented as a text, such as poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction (Sparkes, 2002). Richardson believes that lived experience is embodied in our being and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies. According to her, poetry gives us a greater chance of vicariously experiencing the self-reflective and transformational process of self-creation and this has been my experience through creating and writing my autoethnography, using writing as inquiry to generate my texts. Writing becomes the instrument and method in its own right (Speedy, 2008). This method makes explicit the course our research takes and what our process is that leads to our re-presentations of texts, because we are exposed and there is no place to hide (Richardson, 2005). Writing as inquiry, invites the researcher to be vulnerable as the process unfolds, something that Behar (1996) encourages the researcher in the field to be, for “To write vulnerably is to open Pandora’s Box. Who can say what will come flying out?” (p.19).

My own ways to address the criticisms that writing as inquiry elicits, were to be as transparent as possible by revealing the layers and different stages that my own writing went through; laying transparent my work from inception of inspiration, synchronicities and ideas that arose for me, through to the drafting process and completion of texts which emerged in this research and were creative representations of my engagement with the topic. It was important that I felt truly able to express myself as a woman traversing on a deep level, her menopause transition. It was imperative that I allowed myself to express what transpired in my process, in creative ways that honoured my own transition.

Ethical Issues and Complexities of doing Personal Research

Introduction

It feels important to state that whilst I have referred to the research in this dissertation as being personal research, I am human and my life is constantly impressed and influenced by all those I come into contact with. In this work, I engaged in group retreats with other people, as well as conversations, and my personal process was coloured by my encounters with them (either directly or indirectly). This has led me to understand that no research is personal.

As a psychotherapist and researcher, I endeavour to adhere to the ethical guidelines and criteria of the BACP, the BPS and the UKCP (Bond, 2015; BPS, 2009; UKCP, 2009). I resonate with

McLeod's view that the principles for ethical research and those for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy are the same: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and fidelity (McLeod, 2013). Etherington (2004) agrees and notes that it is vital for the researcher's own process to be transparent. For her, this is one of the goals of psychotherapists and counsellors seeing clients. She asserts that transparency is the key to building the therapeutic relationship and inspiring the humanistic principles of authenticity and positive self-regard (Rogers, 1998), which parallels the process that I engaged in during this research. McLeod goes on to assert that whilst awareness of our ethical responsibility is crucial, it is impossible to design neutrally ethical research (2013).

Through my research, I have taken as my *modus operandi*, and endeavoured to cultivate in a conscious manner, the following qualities, which the BACP (2017) advocates for practitioners: care for self and others; diligence in the way I have approached and written my research; courage to open the doors to my personal process and discuss my topic and writing with other people; empathy towards all those I have encountered during the research process and to myself; honouring my own and other people's identities in a transparent way in my work; humility with regard to acknowledging my own process and the importance of my encounters with other people, who have knowingly or unknowingly become part of this research; integrity in the way that I have connected with myself and those who I encountered during this journey; resilience in being able to go deeper into my menopausal transition and holding that space for other people who chose to share their journeys with me, without judgement; respect for my own and other people's beliefs and traditions; sincerity in all my encounters with other people; and the cultivation of wisdom through my research experience and unfolding knowledge.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) point out that the consideration and balancing of ethical implications is complex and impossible to formulate. They believe that harm which may be caused by qualitative research can be difficult to predict due to its open-ended, exploratory nature. Furthermore, the dilemma is that it can be of different degrees and types and may be offset with benefits. They go on to note that whilst the concept of 'doing no harm' is a worthy principle, it would make much research impossible. Ellis (2007) agrees that there can be no one set of rules governing the ethics of qualitative research. She emphasises the importance of being mindful of the greater good and undertaking considerable reflection alone and with others.

Ellis (2007) notes that when we reveal something of ourselves as researchers, this inevitably means that we reveal something of others. To this end, she advocates that it is vital to continually question our motives and reflect on the process we are involved in during research. I am aware that in exploring my menopausal transition, I was in groups with other women, who, by their presence, would have an impact on my own personal journey. I had to reflect often and consider what my needs were during the research period, as well as what other people's needs, that I could recognise, might be, with regard to my relationship with them. I have been open and honest with those I encountered and explained the research I was engaged with, as well as the fact that I would write about my own personal experiences of the group retreats and the advanced training in psychotherapy group work.

Although my research had no participants, I am aware that I still had an ethic of care to those referenced in my work, for example, the nurse who appears in my Prologue (McLeod, 2013). I took care to protect their anonymity as best as I could. Those who appeared in my research are either not named or given pseudonyms (apart from the facilitators of the shamanic and Sufi alchemical retreats). I took practical measures to keep my material secure by using an encrypted password and a locked bureau. Whilst I did not obtain official consent from those who appear in my narratives (Tolich, 2010), I did speak to everyone in the groups and offered to share my work with them if they wished to read it. Their response was incredibly supportive, with all wanting to read my work once it was completed.

Individual research into personal experience has been criticised for being self-indulgent (Etherington, 2004). Yet, the relevance of personal research, which can tap into universal themes, has been well-documented (McLeod, 2013). Etherington suggests that self-revelation is a legitimate way to research if it can lead researchers and readers to places they may not otherwise move to (Etherington, 2004). The honouring of my expression through menopause has been crucial for my growth and understanding as a woman traversing this change of life. The self-knowledge it has brought, can potentially assist me to facilitate other women who may face challenging times during their menopausal transition. My work may offer other psychotherapists some different ways for working with their clients during this transition. For me, the personal benefits of my research experience are an addition to knowledge and an offering to my profession (Hartley, 2001).

A Duty of Care towards Others

Ethically, qualitative researchers could encounter serious problems if they tell their stories (which invariably include others) and those others do not want their private lives exposed to the public. It is the responsibility to those who are involved (however unconsciously) in the material, which both exceeds and is equal to the responsibility one has to one's self (Roth, 2009). A duty of care towards those that read my work is paramount, as this was an intensely feminine piece of research, and I needed to guard against alienating the reader.

Autoethnographic authors may be criticised for revealing something that has been hidden because it may cause issues for those reading it (Sparkes, 2002). I am aware that due to the topic of this research, it has been necessary to reflect deeply on the issues which have emerged through the writing. I have written about a difficult, personal complex transition through menopause which is also prevalent in my society and culture (Boice, 2007; Kenton, 1998). My attempt at parting the veils of silence which in my experience surround the menopausal transition has involved deep personal exploration which those who read it may find challenging or difficult to connect with. I have endeavoured to present my process in an honourable way which I trust will not alienate the reader, but rather support them in viewing menopause in a different way.

This is a journey to the core of my personal transition where I reveal my process, which at times includes my recollection and experience of interactions with other people who appear in my work. I have reflected on this issue at great length and through supervisory guidance and personal therapy, have come to the conclusion that the writing demands that it writes me and I must trust the process. I have endeavoured to treat highly intimate, personal material, and the way I experience the people who appear in my autoethnography with compassion, understanding and love.

A reason to undertake research into the menopausal transition is to add knowledge and understanding to psychotherapeutic and counselling practice, which may contribute to the quality of therapeutic work (McLeod, 2008). I am aware that this research may be read by my peers, possibly even clients and others who may come across the work in a variety of ways. It has been a challenge to undertake and open up my process for scrutiny so that it is not hidden. Research is meant to be read, rather than locked away in dusty cabinets. Therefore, it is my hope that by sharing the challenging aspects of my process which have come to consciousness, others may be encouraged to see the value in shedding light on their own material.

A Duty of Care to Myself

A duty of care to myself has also been vital through this research journey. Support systems were set in place, such as the supervisory relationship for it, a monthly women's process group, and a quarterly peer group of others engaged in research. Regular client supervision twice a month, ensured that any issues which were constellated for me through client work (for example clients who are going through their own menopausal transition) had an opportunity to be resolved (Shohet, 2008).

There has been an almost constant process of reflexivity which I have engaged in with regard to what is safe for me to reveal about my process and what I am comfortable for people to know (Sikes, 2012). Also, honouring those I represent (living or dead) in my text, using pseudonyms and confidentiality has been another issue I have reflected on. Writing is neither neutral nor innocent. It is a societal and political act, and therefore the way that all people are represented in my texts is important (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Sikes, 2012). I am aware that even though I use pseudonyms for those who may appear in my research, it is possible they could be identified. My way of dealing with this was to let all who appear in this research read my autoethnography if they wished to.

Representing my Research

Pickering and Kara (2017) highlight important ethical issues about representing qualitative research and how this can have a substantial impact on the researcher, participants and those that receive the work and peruse it. In discussion with a number of authors who shared their experience of ethical dilemmas when representing research, they discovered the difficulties authors grapple with in how to respect others' experience and what they term as 'interpretative authority' of the researcher in deciding how interaction with others is presented. They go on to say that "These decisions frequently involve researchers choosing between 'literal' (empirical, evidence-based) and 'real' (authentic, experiential) truths" (p.299). They note that in order to overcome these issues, some qualitative researchers will engage in creative methods such as poems, songs and dance to represent their work. This has been my route in an attempt to honour all who appear in my work. They stress that using creative ways of representation often requires that researchers sacrifice something of their work, for example some element, complexity or setting, in order to engage with participants and those that receive the research. It is important for researchers to give close reflexive attention to how they choose to represent

their work. As they say “It is this reflexive approach which we argue constitutes an ethics of engagement” (p.299).

Tolich (2010) notes that it is important that researchers should not write or publish anything that they are uncomfortable showing anyone who may appear in texts they create. He also offers the following for reflection at all stages of the research and representation process “The question “Who would be offended by what is written? sensitizes and focuses writers both to potential harm and to their responsibility to minimize harm” (Tolich, 2010, p.1605). I have found this to be a question I have reflected on often, as my topic of menopause is not one that has always received positive attention in the literature (see Chapter 2). I have taken on board some of the ten guidelines for ethical research when doing autoethnography that Tolich offers and these have been fruitful during my research and writing up period. I have consulted with others, for example all the people who were in my advanced psychotherapy training group, who were also on the five day Sufi silent alchemical retreat, informing them of my research and my intention to use my own experiences as data collection for this dissertation.

I have been mindful to ask myself in meditation whether I would be happy to let those who are mentioned in my text read my work and have reflected on this at length. I feel that in honouring my process, I am also honouring that of other women who I support in finding different ways to engage with this life transition. I am particularly struck by Tolich’s (2010) advice to “Treat any autoethnography as an inked tattoo by anticipating the author’s future vulnerability” (p. 1608). This, I feel, cuts straight to the heart of a duty of care to myself and others in this research. I can say that at this point in my life, I am honoured to have the opportunity to research my own menopausal transition. I doubt that I will regret this decision because it is such a powerfully, important and natural life change and I feel I have been true to myself and honourable in what I have shared, being careful to take care of and nurture my own vulnerability.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an account of the methodological approach I took in this research, introducing the retreats and advanced psychotherapy training, as ways which facilitated the emergence of my understanding through my menopausal journey. When it came to writing about my own experiences, I turned to the methodology of autoethnography, in order to portray my personal voyage through the research. One of the primary goals of autoethnography is to evoke emotional responses in those that read it, thus producing authenticity and shared

understanding of that which is being researched. This is one way that autoethnographers work to establish claims of textual validity. Evoked emotion becomes the method for establishing a text's claim to knowledge (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographies often include real narrative accounts, fictional ways of disseminating research and poetry with the goal of persuading and moving those that read it (Sparkes, 2002). Autoethnography provided the framework for me to allow my own personal engagement with the topic to unfold in creative ways.

To create my autoethnography, I drew upon writing as inquiry as a method to explore my topic. Richardson (2005) advocates the use of creative writing practices to bring ethnographic and autoethnographic research to life. Being able to engage in experimenting with writing, opened up new vistas and different ways to explore my topic. Using creative research journals and fragments of writing, I followed a loose method which Helene Cixous uses and which is documented in her *Writing Notebooks* (Cixous, 2004). These creative research journals and fragments of texts were woven together to create my autoethnography and provided a reflexive account of my research experience. Whilst being a daunting prospect as I journeyed into uncharted territory there was excitement at what might emerge. I resonate and agree with Goodall (1998) that:

Writing should be dangerous. It should mess with your mind. It should open locks, provide pathways, offer a language capable of inspiring personal, social, and institutional liberation. I think it should help people to think and behave differently, if they choose to. Writing that doesn't do that isn't very good writing (p.5).

It has been important for me to give a discussion of the ethical implications of doing personal research. Ethics are not a set of defined, rigorous rules. Instead, I believe that they are a deep honouring of this sacred work, and all those who I have encountered during the research. Reflexivity has been vital in my research so that the quality of compassion, to myself and others, could emerge (Etherington, 2004).

The following Chapters, 4 and 5, contain representations of my autoethnography and examples of the writing process I engaged in through the methodology of writing as inquiry.

Chapter 4: A Shamanic Rollercoaster

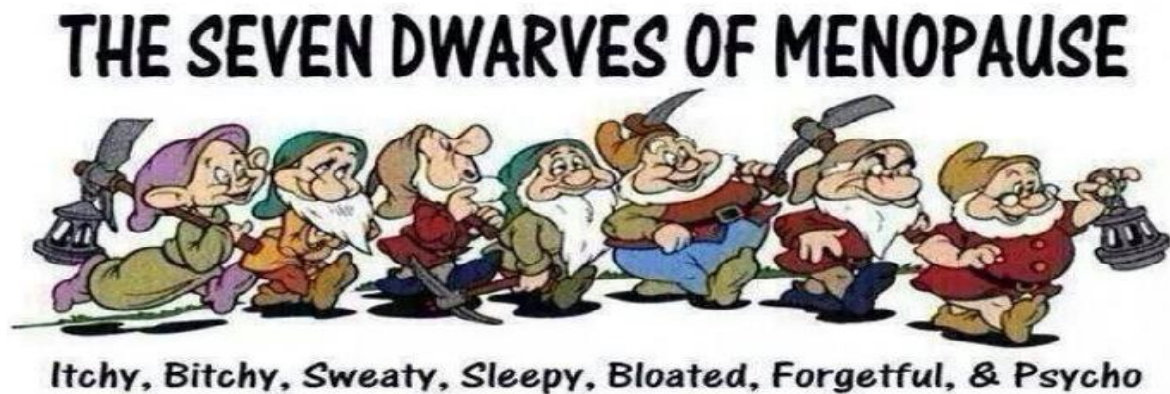
Introduction

This chapter explores the two shamanic retreats I undertook; why they were appropriate for my research in order to attempt to understand my menopausal transition; how I embarked and travelled through these procedures; the process I engaged in around my topic; and what emerged from me as a consequence of undertaking the research in the manner that I chose to. Key to the unfolding of my inner understanding on the topic of menopause was the vehicle of writing as inquiry as a methodology of research proposed by Richardson (2005), and St. Pierre's work on writing for research in which she uses the concepts of Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987 in St. Pierre, 1997) regarding the writing process as that of the rhizome, and a nomadic line of flight. What surprised me as I entered deeply into the research was the realisation that on an inner level, I was traversing an alchemical process as conceived by Jung (Schwartz-Salant, 1995) and that I had a constant struggle between trying to control my process and allowing it to flow.

Using writing as my form of communication for my personal process, a number of poetic representations, musings and dialogues arose. These went through a refining and re-drafting period, until the work represented in this and the next chapter were ready to emerge (Goldberg, 2005). To be able to arrive at the point where these pieces could be presented, I encountered a number of challenges on the way which often derailed me, to the extent that I was not sure at times of what was brewing inside me and what would spill onto the page. I discovered that the challenges that writing as inquiry as a research methodology has laid down to me, were the same as those of my menopausal transition: to stay the course and not become distracted; to search for a deeper engagement and communication with the process; to honour it; and not try to control it. All of this, of course, is easier said than done and my hope is that Chapters 4 and 5 give an honest representation of what I was challenged to engage with, peppered with the fruits of my labour.

Preface to the journey

Shortly before embarking on the research, a female colleague who knew about my exploration into menopause sought me out to show me something on her phone, with the words “...hilarious and so true, Rashon – you’ll love it!”



Once again, I was faced with a society and culture that do not honour this transition or the women whose experiences of life have brought them to this gateway. I was engulfed with emotions and feelings when I saw it¹: I felt guilt, embarrassment, anger and shame because my first response was to laugh. The following poem emerged from my encounter with this image.

Menopause Alert

I admit it

Snide sniggers bubble up

For a few moments.

Fire creeps to surface of skin

And the pervading stench of shame

Sinks in.

¹ The Seven Dwarfs of Menopause Cartoon (Somers, 2013)

Layer upon layers of grimy personas

Surface:

Angry woman

Mad woman

Embarrassed to BE a woman

“How dare she take the piss like this?”

My fate is in the hands of seven dwarfs

So, like them

I will hoist my shovel

And dig in the deep dark places

To mine the potential

And seek the vein of gold

That calls to me

Shedding its light

In the midst of female degradation.

Slight wobble, shifting sands beneath firm resolve

Veils drop into place and the mirror

Expounds the blanket agreement

That this transition makes all women

Itchy

Bitchy

Sweaty

Sleepy

Bloated

Forgetful

&

PSYCHO

The shamanic retreats:

I had decided that in order to collect material for research, I would attend and engage with retreats that offered various cultural perspectives on women's life journeys, in the hope of uncovering a different understanding and sense of meaning around my menopausal transition. I was searching for alternative approaches to catapult and open me up to unorthodox ways of flowing through my change of life.

Both retreats detailed later in this chapter, were profound experiences for me and started a deep inner process of unravelling knots that I had thought I had dealt with years ago. I was challenged through shamanic journeys to face my fears and confront my shadow material. I was unable to disconnect from my process despite consciously trying to. Often, I was unnerved by the feelings, emotions and body sensations which these retreats unleashed for me personally.

Groups of Women

My mind was unable to make any sense of what I was experiencing. One moment I would be laughing and engaging with other women in the groups. The next, I would be experiencing intense emotional fear or great sadness as some forgotten trauma of my past bubbled up to the surface and burst. What became important during both retreats was the presence of the other women in the groups and through sharing our material, I was able to understand that I was not alone in my conflicts. It was a revelation and a new experience for me to be part of groups of women who held compassion, empathy, understanding, love and kindness for each other's painful process during these retreats. We laughed, we cried, we danced, we sang, we held each other when the going was rough. We were a community that held a common ideal – to honour and respect the great transition of our life change. When I shared my personal story, experiences and inner journey in the groups, I felt seen and heard, not only as a woman, but a menopausal woman going through one of the greatest transformations in my life. Many of the women on both retreats were also searching for different ways to navigate their own change of life and I felt great support and the freedom to express myself without the constraints placed on me by my every day existence.

Raw Writing

Along with the groups of women on these retreats, who validated my experience of menopause so far, and shared the need to look outside of the narrow constraints of the medical model to navigate this rite of passage successfully, writing became my refuge. As I started to journal my process, I began the building of an inner container to hold all of the disparate aspects of myself that were emerging through these workshops: disconnection, fear, pain, sadness, shame, my changing body; loss of youth and myriad other losses, as well as joy, playfulness, connection and love.

Being able to write in my notebooks, about what I was doing and where I was doing it; why I was doing what I chose to do; how I was feeling about myself; and my emotional turbulence, started me on the process of being able to download the overwhelming amount of information and feelings onto the pages, in order to free up my mind (Goldberg, 2005; Proffoff, 1980). As I was writing these journals on the retreats, I consciously used the methodology of writing as inquiry to chart the course of my menopause. I was doing what Richardson (1994) does “I write because I want to find out something, I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it” (p. 517). The writings I scribed in my notebooks during the days and evenings of these retreats were the raw writing (Cixous, 2004), the reams of words that spilled onto the pages, the undifferentiated raw material, or in Jungian alchemy (discussed in Chapters 1 and 5) the prima materia (prime matter) of my inner process (Edinger, 1994).

The Enchantress retreat – November 2016

I came across this four day intense retreat whilst racking my brains to try to find out some more information around menopause. I discovered a website devoted to women’s shamanic work facilitated by Lorraine Grayston and Dawn Russell, who have worked closely with Leo Rutherford (psychologist and shamanic healer), for decades. I was intrigued with what they had to say about the importance of the Enchantress archetype for the menopausal woman and how they would base a retreat around it. They assert that this archetype has been disregarded, rejected and neglected through misunderstanding. It has been exiled from our archetypal understanding of the feminine triplicate model of Maiden, Mother and Crone. Echoing the work of Davis & Leonard (2012) and Duckkett (2010), the facilitators of this retreat, assign the season of autumn as the time of the Enchantress. What resonated in my reading of their reasons for offering this retreat was that they believe, that although the Enchantress is aware that Cronehood is on the horizon, the woman resonating with the Enchantress energy is not ready

to slow down, but actively chooses to live, explore her individuality and creativity. They believe that in our British culture and society, this archetype has been distorted, leading to fear of women owning their own personal power. Grayston & Russell (2016) advocate the importance of contacting this archetype within us. In this retreat, the connection to the Enchantress archetype would be facilitated through different spiritual practices: shamanic journeys would be taken to connect on deep inner levels and to find guidance through the challenges we may face during the menopausal transition (Kenton, 1998); we would use Native American Indian songs and chants to further facilitate engagement with the archetype and spiritual guidance; and rituals and ceremonies that celebrate and honour each woman's journey and rites of passage. What I also valued about their approach was that they made it clear that this energy, whilst being connected to menopause, refers to the cyclical movement in all women regardless of their age. I was intrigued, so I booked my place and the first journey began.

I have chosen to write and represent my experiences on this retreat below, in a way that allows for prevalent voices within me at that time to be heard and acknowledged. I draw upon the work of voice dialogue therapists, Hal and Sidra Stone (2011) and the work of other researchers who have personified their inner voices, in order to be able to understand themselves more fully (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). Each has been assigned a different colour so as not to cause confusion:

Wounded Menopausal Woman: which represents my wounded menopausal self, seeking to make sense of this transition – pink font.

Wise Menopausal Woman: a constellation of the observer/the witness/the wise woman, who is able to reflect deeply and surrender to the process – blue font.

The Menopausal Transition: the voice of the transition which articulated new learning that emerged from me, through this retreat – green font.

Part 1: The beginning: what have I let myself in for?

Wounded Woman: I am so excited and nervous to be here. I wonder what it will be like, what will THEY be like? What will I be like? Do I look old and fat? Am I wearing the right clothes? I bet the other women will be slender and pretty and much younger than me. What on earth am I doing? Why did I decide to research Menopause? I dislike this phase I'm going through intensely. Wish I hadn't come now. What will the food be like? Will it hurt me? Since I was diagnosed with complex liver cysts, I have to be careful not to eat certain things like starchy food, otherwise my cysts hurt. I have to eat vegetarian food here, will I be okay? How will I survive if I can't eat it? Would be so much better to have just stayed at home. Why do I feel like a child and not a woman? Christ I'm exhausted, I think I'll go and lie down...

Wise Woman: And so the journey begins. I am curious that I have regressed into the place of the child I was, excited and fearful at the same time, unable to still my mind and allow the present to unfold. Holding these two tensions within me has always been a challenge in my life. I am full of doubts about how I will be perceived by others I meet on this retreat. I have already plunged into survival mode, exhausting myself in the process – and I have only been at the venue for one hour!

Wounded Woman: It's Friday and I arrived at 2pm, had a nap and am good to go. I'm sitting in the group room in a circle with the other women and the two facilitators. 17 of us altogether – that's a lot of women! I'm an only child, I don't know how to be in these kinds of groups. Can I leave now? No-one will know if I really came here or not...

Menopausal Transition: It is perfectly natural for you to feel this overwhelm. So much is changing in your body, mind and spirit. Just focus on being conscious of your body and breathe, be kind and compassionate to the whole of yourself. Take my hand and gently surrender to my world.

Wounded Woman: Oh no, the talking stick is almost upon me and I'll have to tell them something about me. I really don't want to share anything, because every time I speak, I never seem to be able to say what I really want to say. It just doesn't come out right and I end up feeling stupid. Everything is just covered in a thick layer of fog. Thank God I've got a packet of chocolate biscuits for later – that'll sort me out.

Wise Woman: I remember sharing about my dissertation and my issues of even engaging with my menopause. I felt this was difficult for me. I talked about my own cultural heritage, being

the only child of an Italian mother and a father from Bangladesh. I remember that my mother went through an early menopause, still experiencing hot flushes when she was in her early 70's. Unfortunately we never talked about menopause because she died just before I entered perimenopause. My father was also an only child so there were no other women in his line that I could talk to regarding my transition. I explained that I was called to do the weekend because I felt the Enchantress energy has issued me a challenge to go deeply into and with her. As I reveal more, anxiety rises and my eyes fill with tears. As others in the group share, I am not present. I am transported into a different reality:

Water trickles, eroding stone
Flames dance at the centre of this world.
Damp mossy carpet beckons intimate touch
Ritual ceremony of cycles begun.
Fire circled by flowers and seeds
Peppered with crystals, fruit and leaves.
A blood red garment holds her in its embrace
And each natural gift held to that face.
Chanting and humming to each sacred thing
The song of cycles and all that life brings.

I am jolted back into the circle by a word which emerges into my mind: "Danger" and the thought arises that I and women like me who are going through menopause can be perceived as dangerous and this is how some others may view us. Perhaps people who aren't going through the transition don't know how to be with us, so they try to restrain and control the feminine power we innately hold. I wonder why the Enchantress has been forgotten in our collective consciousness and I intuit from my experience in the circle that she is DANGEROUS.

Wounded Woman: God that felt like hours and it was only two that we were in the circle for. I'm starving – feel like I haven't eaten for ages. Oh no, it's pasta and some kind of creamy sauce, bread and cheese. At least there is some salad...The other women seem to be 'normal'

and very nice, I mean there's no seriously attractive, slender sylph like nymphs here... all around my age too. Feeling a bit better that I don't stick out like a sore thumb.

This is the lumpiest, hardest mattress I've ever slept on – no, I tell a lie. That was in 2004 when I was staying in a small family run hotel in Tibet with a friend. I was only 44 (God, I was so young) and I never knew a body could ache so badly. Huh, my body aches all the time these days – no matter where I sleep. Not sure about this Enchantress stuff. It's not making me want to engage with my menopause, I just want it to go away and be normal again. And anyway, all this stuff that the group and facilitators keep cracking on about, using words like 'Powerful', 'Enchantress', 'Seductive', 'Wild', 'Feminine' and 'Soul Nature' all feels like some very far away fantasy to me. I'm bloody angry at this bloody lumpy mattress, and all this airy fairy new age blah, blah, blah. Sod this, I'm going out for some fresh air (and I wish I'd brought a bottle of gin).

Phase 2: The in-between time

Wise Woman: After having slept badly because the room was cold and the mattress lumpy, I awaken in a grumpy mood. The story of the Princess and the Pea comes to mind, and then a critical voice steps in to blight away the engagement with the fairy tale, by telling me that I am no Princess. I am curious that anger is present for me and also understand that the songs, chanting and initial engagement with the group yesterday, have put me on high alert. My defence mechanisms are all kicking in.

Menopausal Transition: You are experiencing huge psychological changes within you through my sacred transition. This is not something to be hidden or defended against. This is a highly tuned rite of passage. Anger is an energy, which when utilised as a defence is destructive, but when used consciously, can move mountains and bring a sense of focused movement in your life, allowing autonomy to emerge.

Wounded Woman: I have to say, I do like the chanting and singing we do as a group. It settles me. I'm not sure I understand the reason why we are enacting the Children's Native American Indian creation myth, but I don't mind moving around as it means I don't have to go too deep. Actually, sitting on the floor all the time gives me an aching bottom so it's a relief to move around the room. Oh no, not again, I'm having a hot flush and need to go to the loo, all at the same time. Is it okay to just leave the room? Just feel anxious yet again – will it ever go away?

The Menopausal Transition: Ah, the hot flush, a wonderful indication of my great transition. Energy is moving up through your body, recalibrating every single cell so that you are renewed. You are being made ready to embrace a new, exciting phase of your life. I know some of my physical signs can be difficult for your body to navigate, yet they all have a reason for occurring. The hormonal changes you experience now, you also experienced at puberty, which readied you to be able to bring new life into the world. My transition is readying you to birth yourself into a new way of living. If you choose to surrender to me...

Wise Woman: I resonate with the group facilitators' beliefs that the archetype of the Enchantress in her true form is about truth and reflection. In her distorted form, she becomes manipulative. I see these two opposites working within me on a day to day basis and I know I am being called to allow more consciousness around these opposites in my life.

Wounded Woman: I knew it, just as I was getting settled and moving my body a bit, we are told we have to get into pairs and reflect to each other what our rhythms are and what stops us from being in our authentic selves. I can already feel myself coming up with the answers before we start. God I'm really tense inside and my tummy hurts. I just want to get this over and done with. It's a beautiful sunny day out there and I want to go and have a cup of tea. That will sort me out – it always does. We're also supposed to look at our experiences of the Enchantress archetype – how this operates in our lives and what blocks us – our fears. Well I could write an essay on my fears. What if the other woman thinks I'm stupid, or inadequate, or don't belong here...

Wise Woman: My old fears have kicked in, along with the disempowerment I felt through most of my life from the distorted masculine energy which has been present in some of the men I have known in one guise or another. It seems, through this powerful exercise, that I realise I am still in fear that I will be hurt because of what I do or say; be belittled; not seen or heard; dismissed or controlled. So how absolutely wonderful for me to be able to release tears as I speak and allow myself to be held in a soft, gentle, nurturing way by the beautiful woman who partnered me in this exercise. I realise that I haven't been held like that since my mother died eleven years ago. I feel the grief rising, as I am aware of how much I miss her and my father as well as my best friend who have all passed on. I am still grieving the loss of my family and loved ones.

Menopausal Transition: Loss and grief are the gateways in my transition to new life. It is imperative that you are able to mourn your losses whatever they may be in an honourable way,

with no denial. Loss and grief are not meant to be controlled, but are a force unto themselves. I know you want to neatly put your feelings into a framework to contain them, but my transition is about flow, not constraint and I urge you to allow the feelings to wash over you when they come. This is a sacred rite and water, which are your tears has always been used as part of initiation and healing, in all traditions. Love your tears, for they contain the essence of truth and are the well-spring of your own healing.

Wounded Woman: Thankfully, I don't have much time to dwell in fear. Phew! Wipe those tears away and blow that snotty nose. We're back in circle. I love this song we are singing, it actually soothes me:

The river is flowing, flowing and growing

The river is flowing, down to the sea

Mother Earth carry me

Your child I will always be

Mother Earth carry me, down to the sea.

Wise Woman: It has been good to have a break and eat good nurturing food which my body has thanked me for. I am fascinated that at the beginning of this journey I was fearful that food would hurt me. Everything I have eaten here has nurtured me. I feel more grounded and anchored in myself. Lighter and at peace.

Menopausal Transition: The whole of my transition is about nurturing. What nurtured you before you embarked on this journey, may be different now. Your body is in a process of change and renewal. Mindfulness in everything is the key to successful navigation of my transition. Love is the glue that binds everything within you together – and most importantly, Radical Self-Care; giving yourself what you need and require, ministering to yourself before others.

Wounded Woman: Finally, we get to do a shamanic journey. Now I might get to the spiritual part of me which feels parched. Haven't been able to connect with that part for a long time now, well, really since this menopause change, which seems to have derailed and catapulted me into negative feelings and emotions.

Wise Woman: We are all invited to take a shamanic journey, setting our intention to connect with the Enchantress energy. Through taking this journey accompanied by the beat of a drum,

we enter an altered state of consciousness which provides access to other dimensions in order to acquire the tools which can be brought back to facilitate healing. It is a powerful way to seek guidance for personal issues.

I am at the old Yew tree in Compton Dundon. A snake and a black cat wait for me. We move up inside the tree and travel to the upper worlds. We walk along a path and then plunge down into the lower worlds through a cave system. The woman I had encountered in my earlier spontaneous journey beckons me to put on an emerald green gown and sit opposite her, outside of the circle of crystals, flowers, and fruits with a fire in the middle. The cat and snake (who has now morphed into a cobra) sit too. We are placed in four directions.

She tells me it is important to do this ceremony of cycles in order to truly connect to the spiritual aspect of my menopausal transition.

Then a circle of men come in and sit around us. The woman tells me they are sorry and have come to ask for my forgiveness for what they have, and have not done for me. I am aware of tears flowing profusely, saturating my skin. Then women come and sit, encircling the men and also express their sorrow for what they have, and have not done for me. They all ask for my forgiveness.

The woman takes my hand and there is an exit from the cave. We go through this portal and are on the side of a mountain, surrounded by other mountains and valleys. Everywhere I look, there are thousands of people all chanting together. I am told that “These are all your ancestors. They want you to do this work – they are proud of the woman you are becoming. This (and she gestures to the ancestors and the land) is what holds you”.

Everything starts to fade and I am back in the room.

Wounded Woman: I feel as if a heavy weight has been lifted from my heart. But why can't I stop crying? Why have my male and female ancestors asked me to forgive them? I just don't understand this – I feel awful, even recognising in this journey that THEY asked ME to forgive them – surely I should be the one asking them to forgive me?

Menopausal Transition: My transition demands that you let go of the past, old hurts and that which you have outgrown, and surrender into a place of forgiveness, to yourself for what you have or haven't done, and to all those others who you perceive have hurt you. This is a fundamental spiritual principle, which is entwined in all spiritual practice. It is a heartfelt process which leads to acceptance of all that you are and honours all that others are too.

Phase 3: The end is near

Wounded Woman: Oh not again, another exercise where I have to share with another woman what I need to let go of and how I might change if I do let go of it. Ok I will give this a good try, and just try to be present with it, rather than coming up with the answer now and controlling the process like I did on the last exercise. Actually, now, I feel quite hopeful about this. Various women in the group have asked me about my research and asked if they can read what I write! I feel hopeful again...

Wise Woman: I understand that I need to let go of my fear which constellates in the distorted energies of anger, disapproval and the negation I have sometimes felt of my own knowing. What I intuit for the second question is that I must open my heart to love both men and women, unconditionally without expectation.

Wounded Woman: This is great, I've got to find two sticks, one long and straight, and one which is misshapen. Then I have to write on two pieces of paper what I am letting go of, and what change I want to bring into my life. I write that I want to let go of my fears of the masculine and on the second piece of paper that I want to be in my own personal power and act from a place of love. Yes, that feels right to me. I'm really looking forward to the big ceremonial fire at the end of today. At the fire, we will speak out our intentions one by one, in a ritual way and then throw each stick in the fire. It feels so good to be part of this and be here with all these wonderful women, witnessing each other and holding the space.

Menopausal Transition: This is how you may engage with me on a deeper level, to let go of the psychological difficulties you encounter, and to open up to the spiritual aspects of my transition. Ritual and Ceremony are vitally important because they bring the silence out into the open and shed the light of consciousness. By speaking your truth in this sacred group of women, you are witnessed and supported, as you witness and support them. This is how the veils of silence are parted for each woman in their individual journey.

Wounded Woman: I'm going to collect some objects in nature. I have a jar and these objects are to symbolise what I want to let go of and what I want to change in my life. I put vodka in my jar (to aid preservation of the energies of the objects) and this is my own unique Enchantress potion. What a lovely thing to be able to take home with me – something that will always remind me of this retreat.

Wise Woman: This strong medicine holds the Enchantress energy that we desire in ourselves and which we are embodying. We are advised that we could sprinkle some of this elixir around when we are doing ceremony or ritual work. The facilitators reminded us that we have worked in the deep roots of the Enchantress energy and we are asked to be mindful that issues may arise around what we have let go of, in the next few days and to reflect on this. I am aware of changes in my mind, body and also a deepening connection with my spiritual nature. I also noted that the wounded woman within me has completed this retreat with excitement and joy.

It took me a good week to come back to my normal everyday reality. What I can say is that this retreat has stayed with me to the present day. I derived so much understanding about myself and my process through menopause, and how much I have hidden the powerlessness I have felt for so many years; my fear around the masculine and my own journey to reclaim and acknowledge my own changing circumstances. I came away from this retreat, feeling completely embodied and sensing great strength in my vulnerability.

The Matridonal retreat: May 2017

After having had such a profound experience on the Enchantress Retreat, I decided once again to do a retreat with Lorraine Grayston and Dawn Russell. I chose the Matridonal Journey which is based on working through the archetypal journey of birth, as I felt that I was in a process of re-birthing through my menopausal transition. This presentation wanted to be written in a different way, as a commentary on the retreat, interspersed with my own process, which here is coloured blue.

Day 1: Introduction and Overview

The title of this 5 day retreat comes from a group of homeopathic remedies collectively known as Matridonal remedies. The facilitators explained that in the next few days, we would be on a journey, being birthed anew. The remedies provide gateways for us to travel into a deeper sense of self and consciousness around the issue of who we really are.

Through the week, we would be engaged in taking the remedies and using other practices for example, shamanic journeying, crafting, breath work and time in nature. This is because when we undertake the journey to health, unhealthy issues and problems will arise; through these practices we will breathe and facilitate these unhealthy energies within us to move through our bodies and minds quickly.

As a group we spent time sharing what had drawn us to this retreat, and what is happening for us in our lives right now. I share my work on my menopausal transition and am heartened by how many women genuinely smile as I speak.

Day 2: Amniotic Fluid and Placenta

The Gateways

A gateway is a door into an archetypal energy. It is a rite of passage. Our birth journey is an archetypal journey of life and it is our intention to embody the health of the rites of passage we are traversing. We must engage with each of the gateways in order to be able to open to that energy. Examples of this are our First Blood, and the Menopause. Each of these are movements into different ways of life transitions and it is our conscious connection with these rites of passage which will determine how we navigate each of these portals.

Gateway 1: Amniotic Fluid

Our intention in taking the homeopathic remedy of amniotic fluid, is to embody its energy and ingesting the tablet opens the gateway. Amniotic fluid is about the birth process and this first movement is about unity and no thought, while still being connected and surrendering to the energies of this place, from which we all come.

My process through gateway 1 and my experience

When the remedy was coming around the circle, before I was handed it, I could feel myself becoming restless and starting to shake. Just holding the remedy set off vibrations in my left lower leg and I felt disorientated when I took it. I was completely in another place. I could feel my belly rhythmically undulating. I was in a pre-birth state and had no language to explain this experience. I wondered to myself how this ties in with my menopausal journey and I sense that I am being asked to follow the rhythms of my unique transition and surrender to the different levels of my own experiences.

Afterwards, in nature, I started to craft a stick to symbolise the dead wood in me which needs to be cleared away – this was the message given to me in nature and echoes an inner knowing that my menopause is about letting go of the old, stuck patterns within me.

Gateway 2 – Placenta

When we are born, we come into an ancestry of spirit, blood and life. Birth is not complete, until the placenta is born. The placenta connects us through to the ancestors. In the Aboriginal tradition, the placenta would be buried by a tree and this is where that person (whose placenta it was) would go to connect with their ancestors. I am astonished that photographs of the placenta, look like trees. This sets off many thoughts pinging in my head around family trees:



Our ancestry is important because it also connects us to other lands and cultures. This gateway offers us the invitation to be part of our richness, our physical blood ancestors and our spiritual ancestors.

We were taken into a shamanic journey with the following intention.

“I am journeying to meet my ancestors through my mother’s line, my father’s line and to meet my spiritual ancestors”.

My process through gateway 2 and my experience

I was by a small river with a bridge which I crossed, leading to a cave in the wall of a huge rock. I travelled downwards, a long way. I was going to meet my ancestors from my mother's line (both the men and women). I felt at one stage of this journey that I was not sure anything happened. I also had a sense of powerlessness and anger. I did meet some priestesses who seemed ancient, and communed in nature rather than in an edifice.

As I travelled to meet those on my father's side, I had to push myself through a thick rubber-like barrier or membrane. I saw men and women of all races and felt a sense of betrayal, anger and abandonment. However, I met a band of fierce and brave female warriors, who went far back in the lineage. They seemed to be a tribal community.

I then travelled to meet my spiritual ancestors. I met an old Indian man and a northern woman. She told me that she joins both my parent's lines together. The Indian man gave me a brew to drink which was bitter to taste. He told me that on a spiritual level, my liver cysts were carrying all the repressed ancestral emotions of betrayal and anger. He said that there were issues with sugars on my father's side and on my mother's side there is an intolerance of grains. I should avoid these substances as they hurt my stomach and make the cysts grow. The cysts are passed through the women on both sides of my ancestral line, and denote their powerlessness in the face of aggression and violence, perpetrated by men.

This was such a powerful journey, offering a different way of viewing the physical and psychological issues that I have faced through my menopausal transition. I am in awe at how much menopause is impacting me physically, mentally and spiritually.

Day 3: Vernix and Folliculinum

Gate 3 – Vernix

Today we started to work towards individuality and understanding that we are unique, individual and a creative expression of the Great Spirit. In the Matridonal journey, gestation is the place where we develop our vernix. In the womb, at around the 16 week stage, the baby is covered in this waxy, cheesy substance. Through the vernix, in the amniotic fluid of the womb, we create our own boundaries.

Through this gateway and using the homeopathic Matridonal remedy of Vernix, we are reflecting and journeying with how we keep our healthy sense of self in an overcrowded world.

My process through gateway 3 and my experience

After I took the Vernix, I just wanted to be outside. Out in nature, I finished crafting my letting go stick with the energies of anger, dead wood, fear and betrayal. I started crafting my more positive stick of who I am and what I want for my life. It was delightful for me to be drawn to objects of nature in many different colours, and to see the blending of light and dark, flowers, trees and feathers.

Gateway 4 – Folliculinum

This gateway is about the right or the Rite to be a woman and express feminine energy in us in its depth and in its essence. The right to stand true as a woman and the right to our healthy feminine energy.

That is my fear, to express my feminine energy without fearing that the aggressive masculine will destroy me. I can really feel this in my body, the need to shut it down to survive.

What is the deep archetypal feminine? It is our creative gift. Part of the feminine energy is the mystery and not knowing. This “not knowing” is that subliminal, and liminal place where we surrender and this cannot be done through the head, only through our hearts and our intuition.

And now my liver cyst is upset

This energy is largely unseen and takes place deep inside us. We need to understand and say to ourselves “I am not just an individual with a healthy sense of self, I am a woman with a healthy sense of self”.

There are so many body feelings I am experiencing and I am feeling unsafe.

After we ingest the remedy, we are asked to go outside in nature and commune with the earth to ask her what it is that she wants us to birth individually.

My process through gateway 4 and my experience

My experience out in nature of what the earth wants to birth through me or rather, what the deep, dark, feminine wants to birth through me is:

To shine a light on my truth.

Outside, I also continued to craft my positive stick. I have noticed that my body has not been good with the food here so far, it is heavy and my stomach aches and my cysts don't like it.

On reflection, I see that Folliculinum for me at this time in my menopausal transition is bringing me the challenge of owning my feminine self and honouring myself as a woman. Allowing my distorted views of what I as a woman should be like, act like, look like, to be transformed into acknowledgement and acceptance of myself as a menopausal woman.

Day 4: Oxytocin and Lacumanum

Gateway 5 – Oxytocin

It is a rite of passage for us to be born in bliss, joy, trust and intimacy. The remedy for this is Matridonal Oxytocin which can be produced by looking with love into another's eyes. This gateway gives us access to trust and intimacy. Often this is shut down, when we have had our heart broken by a relationship with another – i.e. “I will not let you into my heart again because it will be broken”.

This feels very uncomfortable to hear.

Today we are all to be birthed anew, with proper ritual and ceremony. A hammock is arranged in the middle of the room and it is adorned with sheepskins, blankets, covers and cushions to make each person feel safe and comfortable. One person at a time goes into the hammock of the womb and the other women walk slowly around, allowing whatever sounds want to come, to emerge from us for a time. We then start singing “Earth Child, Star Child, now is the time to open your eyes”. As we do this, whoever is in the Hammock emerges through birth into life in the loving arms and energy of all present.

My process through gateway 5 and my experience

I was the first to be birthed – I really needed to go first – and my birth was very gentle and sweet. I felt nurtured, welcomed and loved in the arms of these self-less women.

Gateway 6 – Lacumanum – Breast Milk

This gateway is about healthy nurturing and sustenance through our mother's milk. Our innate nature on this planet is bonding. It is our right to be in connection, in communion, in love, nurture and have intimacy.

All of those places within us which have suffered from malnutrition can always be fed, loved and healed by this elixir, which brings us our connection to the earth and this life – without it we are disconnected and split.

My process through gateway 6 and my experience

I went out in nature and was called to the willow tree. However when I got there people kept walking past and distracting me, so I went somewhere else and the same thing happened. In the end I felt angry and went back to my room. I felt safe and realised this is what happens to me in my everyday life. Client work and students taking up a lot of my time and my boundaries are not firm enough. So I have to shut the door and isolate myself in my home. I shared this in the group and the facilitators reflected that this was not healthy. This made me feel even angrier – I felt defensive and unable to receive this input. I realised later that I'd had the opportunity to connect with others and I didn't take it.

Day 5: Umbilical Cord

Gateway 7 – Umbilical Cord

Today is our day of completion and release through the Matridonal remedy of the Umbilical Cord. This gateway is about our creative expression and potential. The umbilical cord is attached to the baby in other cultures until it breaks naturally. It contains important stem cells from the Divine, the environment and the ancestors. Our culture cuts this cord too soon. This remedy opens us up to the diverse creativity in us which we may not even be aware of.

After we had ingested the remedy, we took a shamanic journey to connect with our spiritual guides – that was our intention. Afterwards, we came together and completed the retreat.

My process through gateway 7 and my experience

Once again I was in Amdo by the stream/river. With me are the old Indian man, the woman of the North and a Tibetan. I am led to a simple Buddhist temple and in the courtyard of the temple, I am greeted by the Lama. I am cleansed and purified with clouds of incense and water is sprinkled over me. I notice on the floor is a long rope. I am led through the courtyard and into the temple where there are monks sitting on both sides of me chanting/toning. I walk down the middle of the temple, to the other side where there is a clearing with a fire in the middle of it. Before I get to the fire I can see a big arena full of so many people all dressed in white, listening to me as I speak. We pass on until we arrive at the fire. I see that there are many of me dancing around the fire in all colours, black, grey, white, brown, orange, purple, pink, blue, yellow, green, silver and gold.

I am transported to an art gallery, a modern place. All the walls, ceilings and floors are white and there are many pictures on the wall, all painted by me – just paintings of colours – no drawings. There are people gathered looking at the pictures. I am given the message to allow my guides to paint the pictures through me.

This felt like a profound inner journey for me and a wonderful way to finish this retreat. I had contacted a powerful aspect of myself and I intuited that it was about my voice being heard and my work being read. It has stayed with me to this present day and I am incredibly grateful for the guidance I received through this retreat and the shamanic journey work.

Whilst I felt the Enchantress retreat had been profound and powerful for me at the time, the Matridonal journey took me to a different level and provided me with much understanding of my own life's journey and my menopausal transition. Key for me during this retreat was the emphasis on self-care, nourishment and my own personal healthy boundaries.

Chapter 5: Initiation – An Alchemical Process

Introduction

This chapter continues my personal journey with menopause through aspects of the advanced training in psychotherapy year one, which focused on Jungian alchemy; a spontaneous and impromptu retreat I took into woodland; and my engagement during a group Sufi alchemical retreat (a requirement of the psychotherapy training).

The Great Work of Alchemy

In order to support my EdD research and to further my own career, I decided to do an advanced training in psychotherapy. Year one of this training focused on the approach of alchemy as a journey of transformation (von Franz, 1998). Used in psychotherapy alchemy is a way to map the process of the psyche as it undergoes the challenges and trials of purification and consciousness engagement with issues being examined in a therapeutic context (Edinger, 1994). The Opus (great work) I was involved in creating, placed me on a trajectory, travelling through various alchemical stages and operations detailed in Chapter 1 (pp.12-13), which provided me with a lens through which I was able to chart and understand my inner process of menopause through the different retreats (Hamilton, 2014). This alchemical journey provided containment for understanding and meaning making of my process to become conscious. The alchemical model of transformation fostered understanding of my inner chaos and led to my connection at deeper levels with my menopausal journey.

My engagement with the powerful symbols and imagery that emerged on these retreats was transformative for me. An example of this is the following dream I had on the Enchantress retreat (Chapter 4), and how through an alchemical lens, I could start to make sense of what my inner process was at this time.

I am in a cave, with water lapping into it and trickling down the cave walls. An ancient old man has made a fire which burns brightly. I am lying on the floor, naked. He starts to cut off my limbs and dismembers me, throwing each part into the fire. I am then knitted together and become whole again. I step out of the fire and go into the water for a swim. As soon as the water touches my skin, I melt and become it. The dream ends. [16/5/17]

Through discussion with my advanced training group, after I had returned from the retreat, I understood that in alchemical terms, I was going through the operation of solutio, and this dream about dismembering (or the shamanic death) is a symbol of this trial by water (Edinger, 1994). I was in the negredo stage, where my fixed, inflexible, critical self-talk and despondency about my changing body was causing emotional turbulence (Hillman, 2013). I felt the dismemberment process was a symbol of all the beliefs and restrictions I had around my menopausal transition that were ready, for me on a conscious level, to slowly dissolve.

Often in the solutio process there will be tears which can be seen as the dissolving agent and as I connected with my tears during these retreats, the resistance within me started to melt (Hamilton, 2014). As Edinger (1994) says:

For the alchemist, solutio often meant the return of differentiated matter to its original undifferentiated state – that is, to prima materia. Water was thought of as the womb and solutio as a return to the womb for rebirth (p.47).

In the second stage of solutio, body and spirit are dissolved in one another, and out of this, the spirit is regenerated into a new form. Images for this part of the process range from drowning, bathing, baptism, floods, melting, dew, rain etc. (Edinger, 1994). I could see that my melting into the sea and becoming water itself, was a sign that I was undergoing an inner transformation of my negative beliefs and feelings towards my identity as a menopausal woman.

Challenges of writing and menopause

The major challenge that I encountered in the writing process and my journey through menopause is that I wanted to know what I was producing, before I had generated it. I wanted to control my menopause and how it was depicted through the writing. This controlling aspect of me demanded to know the outcome and make sure that the end product was valuable. My greatest challenge through the experimental writing practices was being able to let go of the outcome and to allow myself to be open to what emerged. This is one of the greatest issues that writers of all genres encounter, the challenge to let go of the controlling aspects of the mind and to surrender to the process (Goldberg, 2005; Millin, 2009).

To support and encourage myself, I used two writing practices as a way to connect with my menopausal and writing processes: I borrowed an idea from Millin (2009) of using words which are written on small pieces of paper and then folded and put in a box. These act as prompts for writing. I decided to use words that meant something to me around menopause

and what I was experiencing. Below are the words that I put in my box, which I would use at different times in my research:

Distraction	Disease	Blocks	Armed	Bees
Denial	Fragmentation	Defence	Emotion	Broken
Fear	Boundaries	Distortion	Splitting	Birds
Memory	Mind	Body	Time	Trees
Heart	Experiment	Poet	Writing	Flowers
Shamanism	Trickster	Alchemy	Coniunctio	Ceremony
Putrificatio	Solutio	The Spirit Mercurius	Coagulatio	Ritual
Separatio	Sublimatio	Mortificatio	Calcinatio	Secrets
Dreams	Vision	Hail Stones	Thunder	Transformation
Earth	Air	Fire	Water	Transmutation
Winter	Spring	Autumn	Summer	Transition
Thunder	Lightening	Storm	Wind	Transgress
Rain	Movement	Past	Alone	Unconscious
Building	House	Archaeology	Sound	Mother
Mining	Day	Night	Darkness	Crone
Moon	Light	Sun	Colour	Enchantress
Sweetness	Beauty	Trust	Hope	Blood
Mystery				

At points when I tried to free myself and open out to what might emerge through the writing around my topic, I would freeze. A blind would descend and I felt powerless and unable to even write one word (Cameron, 2016). In these instances, I disciplined myself to pick a word out of my word box, timed myself for 15 minutes and wrote whatever I thought or felt about that word without stopping until the time was up (Goldberg, 2005).

Whilst that practice worked during some periods, I found it difficult to use it as a daily exercise and often felt disconnected from my own process. I was constantly distracted by work, loved ones, my environment and all the tasks and chores which needed my attention on a daily basis. Whilst discussing this difficulty with my original supervisor (Dr Reed), he suggested I write on large sheets of paper, twice a week, for about an hour to see what came. Dr Reed asked me to think over some of the retreats I had been engaged in and to write a word, or a phrase that emerged when I read back over my journal notes.

Experimental Writing Sheet 1: 13 June 2017

[illegible]

Feeling supported and understood in my difficulties with engaging in experimental writing and menopause, I started the A3 sheets practice in June 2017. The first sheet (on the previous page) illustrates my process well at this time. I felt pressured, stupid, and unable to connect for the first half hour, so I expressed this on the page. As time moved on, in the last 15 minutes of that first, tricky session, some spontaneous work started to emerge.

Experimental Writing Sheet 2: 17 June 2017

17/6/17 (2)

Psychic crisis myth
Sense of being split off and
somebody in my archetypal group
have or are suffering the death
of something - resistance to letting
go. But of course if I can't let go,
how can the new come in? The
new light on the subject, revelation,
meaning, new experiences etc etc.

Beware of running before
you can walk. Rashly -
remember what happens
to psyche - she broke
the rule & looked upon
the face of Eros -
& she was lost -
He was lost &
that nasty
Aphrodite punished
Psyche for taking
eros away
from her
by forcing
her to do
the seemingly
impossible
tasks.

growing process, something new has been born within me.

But am I Swanlike? Not in
looks, no definitely not
a swan, to protect its boundaries and not
put up with any woman - I am becoming
the post-M-woman, who won't lie down
my boundaries are clearer & healthier
in this journey I am on. Somehow
coming to a more firmer sense
of my identity as a woman
without being over-
mutual love, support
& guidance, I
have lost
my self.

And this is the old way of being
feeling that I represent - a
death experience followed by a
rebirth or new understanding.
This is an archetypal
illumination.
But no one knows... & means etc. &
What does it mean?
So far, in my life, death has
always been a mourning of deep loss.
IN THE SHAMANIC WORLDVIEW,
THE SWAN IS THE HEALING
FORCE OF SPIRIT - INTERESTING...

trials of loss,
loneliness, feelings
of isolation and loneliness,
becoming disconnected & fragmented.
+ many other trials - have only been
bearable for me because of the other women
I have encountered in my life at this time & in my field work group.

Too kind, too much. I sense this speaks to me as hormonal changes, life changes and illness.

The trials I feel I have been through in this menopausal journey

When I came to sit down and experiment in this session, I looked at my first writing sheet and realised I had written it in pencil. I found this curious and began to wonder if I was unconsciously hedging my bets, so that if I made a mistake or error on that sheet, I could rub it out. I wondered what this was saying about my inner process of menopause, possibly that I was desperate for it to disappear as if it had never existed. This was a revelation that the experimental writing had shown me. For sheet 2 (page 91), I used a pen. After the initial 10 minutes of doubting my abilities, although I was still trying to control the process, I felt a lessening as the time passed and by the time the hour was up, I felt that I was dropping deeper into myself and my menopausal process. This second sheet shows my process through wanting to describe what I had been learning about alchemy in the advanced psychotherapy training (illustrated in the myth of Psyche and Eros, (Neuman, 2016)) and the gradual loosening up for new images and symbols to emerge. When I looked at what I had written at the end of the hour, I could see the shape of a Swan that my text had naturally moved into.

During the writing of this A3 sheet (shown on page 91), I was still in a place of splitting: my mental, rationale mind wanted to control the process, by having me write about various topics, such as the Spirit Mercurius (Edinger, 1994). My deep, creative, unrestricted aspect wanted to write about the chrysalis on the bottom right of the page and the indignation that I had felt when shop assistants had addressed me as madam. This anger which spilled out on the sheet, was the foundation for the following poem about my experience of becoming a madam in other people's eyes.

Madam

"That will be £2.95

Thank you Madam – see you soon".

Silently, seething,

"No you bloody won't".

Take a breath. Sit down.

Scalding liquid meets

A raging inferno.

"When the hell did I become a **MADAM**?"

Looking in the mirror

The veil hides the changes

Visited upon my visage

By the God of old Things.

Sagging, and sprouts of alien strands

Piercing and rending the veil.

Oh shit, my eyebrows have been invaded

By the silver grey of Ageing.

Denial sews the split with invisible stitching

Youthfulness mirrored back – I'm sure

But everyone else sees

An ageing **MADAM**

Once upon a time

A young child

A precocious child.

A PROPER LITTLE MADAM

It seems

I have become

That child again and

A PROPER BIG MENOPAUSAL MADAM.

Experimental Writing Sheet 4: 27 July 2017

Psyche Dies. An old point in the night,
and Dies. To become the bride of death.
Psyche is to become the bride of death.

I was never a bride.
The only time I got asked,
my lover put the ring on
my finger & it broke.
A spiral silence
was upon & I small
I don't think so, do you?

Get these myths are graphic.

The growing flower in my heart, the seed has been buried in the
needs silence, quietness, nurture and warmth to keep it growing.

Deep buried seeds waiting to grow
in the dark, in the silence
of my heart, waiting for
the light to appear and
grow into the end of the world.

27/6/17 (4)

The Dragon
flies in
Africa, when
Subsaharan
Came from
born at the
spiral core
beautiful
grief rituals

I love spirals. I see them
in so many places & they
remind me of the spirals
in nature & myself.

The annoyed
at the driver
on the page -
it all seems
so controlled and
twice

Darkness is a death
of the old way of
being.

Bellocks
as
no
sex
pistols
said.

Thinking
I am
growing
the loss
of my spirit,
substituting my
family & doing
an incredible job of
keeping it going.

a lighthouse is a beacon in
the dark that helps ships to
navigate their way safely.

where is my light house to
help me find my way in the void?

I need a wailing
good cry - the
kind of crying
that comes
from the
heart.

Feeling dry &
Parthod today,
all this stuff about
death - even this
exercise feels lifeless. But what will quench my
thirst? What will bring me back to life? The kiss
of a prince? Or even a frog? No, I don't think
this fairy tale will do it. I need water -
the waters of grief to flow so
that the flowers can grow
again.

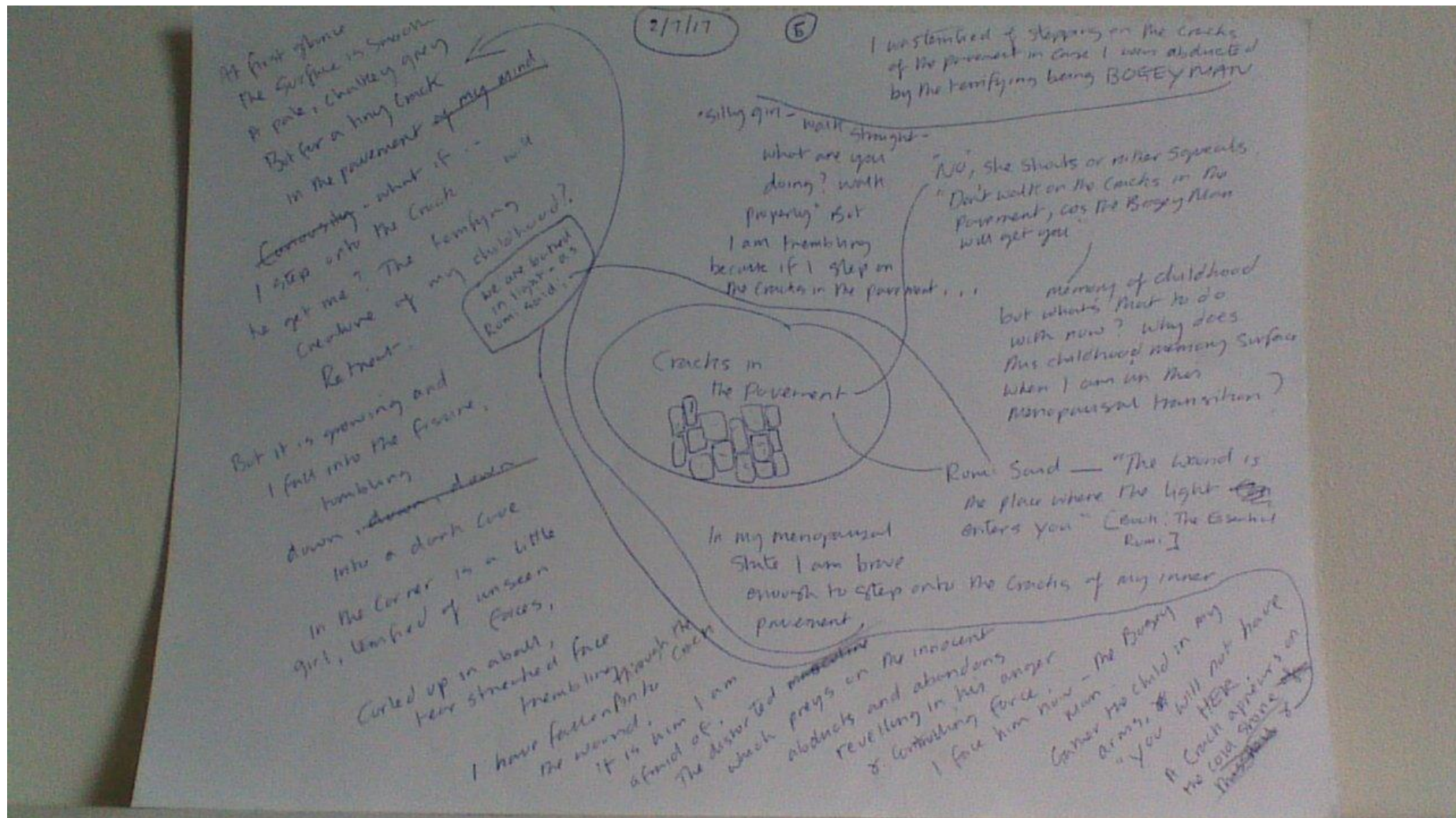
Went to a meeting in the Community
of elders in Kings Cross on Sunday.
to talk to the life of a Samadhi for
Africa. Spiritual teacher Subashan
I met for a few hours and she gifted
me in so many ways. Gave me a
the same rituals to perform & the day
I decided to perform them out in
nature, she showed me to see
them. I was. Synchronicity in
action. We all gathered to
grieve Subashan for the loss
of this sparkling 53 year
old woman & great soul.

If I was a
fairy tale, which
would I be? Perhaps
The Handless Maiden,
or one not written yet?

Falling into the cracks
of the pavement
into the void

Rumi
said something about
the cracks, along
the lines of the
cracks are the
place where the
light can shine
through

This session felt tricky for me to engage with. A wonderful woman, who had been a spiritual teacher on the shamanic path had died and there was a memorial service which I had just been to. I was grieving for her and those of her students and family who were left behind. In this A3 writing sheet (page 96) I see the beginnings of the cracks in the pavement poem (p.96) and that I was veering between the emotional turbulence of anger, sorrow, depression around death, yet meanwhile another part of me was writing about something that was seeding in my heart. It was hard for me to face this grief, confusing it with grief about my own loss of youth, vitality and inability to make peace with the menopausal changes taking place in my body and mind.



It was in this experimental writing session (A3 sheet 5 on page 96) that I felt a shift within me. I could feel I was freeing up and in a state of meditative alertness (Goldberg, 2005). A difference from the last two sheets, was that I started this work with a small drawing in the middle of the page and this led to a spontaneous poem, Cracks in the Pavement, which is represented below. The seed of this had come through in the previous writing sheet, and I feel it was the quote by the poet Rumi “The wound is the place where the light enters you” (Barks, 2004) that emerged to aid me through the grief I was feeling when I worked on that sheet. As I sat with this piece of paper, I could feel a sifting process going on in my mind. My body started to relax, my breathing slowed and I was in a meditation process with this writing (Progoff, 1980). As I was writing this A3 experimental writing sheet, the image of pavement stones and the cracks which pervaded them came into my mind. Consequently a chain of memories and imagination emerged, which culminated in a rough poem scribbled on this A3 sheet.

The memories which flooded back to me were those that belonged to childhood, and in particular a game I used to play as a young child with my friends, not jumping on the cracks of the pavement. They had to be avoided at all costs otherwise the Bogey man might kidnap us. We would avoid the cracks with a religious fervour – so in fear were we that we would be taken. Now, as a woman travelling through her menopausal change, these old wounds surfaced into consciousness, bubbling up through the cracks into the present.

Cracks in the Pavement

Pristine

Smooth surface

Pale, chalky grey,

But for the tiny

Crack

So small

An insignificant blemish

Beckoning

Taunting

Hunting

RETREAT

Engulfed
Tumbling
Fissure engulfs
A dark cave.
A little girl, in the corner
Terrified of unseen forces,
Curled up in a ball
Tear-streaked face
Trembling.

I have fallen
Into the wound
Reigned over by
The distorted one who preys on the innocent
Abducts and abandons
Revelling in anger
And controlling force.

I face him now
Compassion bursting out in flames
Gather the child in my arms
A crack appears
On the cold, hard stone
We are bathed in light
As Rumi said
“The wound is the place
Where the light enters you”

Experimental Writing Sheet: themes which have emerged: 2 July 2017

<p>Session ① Foraging - for the wild parts. Act of writing is foraging for a juicy morsel. A delicious delicacy buried in the deep, dark soil of my inner terrain.</p>	<p>Seeds - Sorting from the psyche & Eros myth. Need to find the seeds in me, healthy ones ready to germinate. Need to discard the empty husks - the old, dead stuff of my mind. ①</p>	<p>Pencil as metaphor for me at menopause. Easy to blur, smudge, not solid enough or formed as yet. Easy to rub out - feels of being insubstantial. ①</p>	<p>The process of menopause - difficult with engaging. My inner state reflects the outer state of my society & culture which does not engage. ①</p>	<p>Control - issues with trying to control the writing process. Splitting mind & being embodied through writing which is dangerous to my thinking process, because of a loss of control over the process. ①</p>
<p>Session ② Resistance to letting go of old identity of being a woman & embracing myself as a menopausal woman. Seeking Solace & Support. A community which has come in the form of groups of women through my fieldwork. ②</p>	<p>Archetypes: Death - A death of the old & something new being born - illumination, understanding. Swan - Archetype of feminine - graceful and a fierce protector of its boundaries. Give up of former sense of my identity now. ②</p>	<p>Session ③ - Madam - how others perceive me in my transitioning state. Memories of being a child labelled as a "proper little Madam" too big for her boots. A madam - deviant, hiding, managing houses of ill-repute. ③</p>	<p>Surrender - It's all about surrender. It's in the psyche myth & it is in my transition. Surrendering to the foreign inner landscape I am journeying in, without a legible map of the terrain. Needing to ask for help & support. ③</p>	<p>Image of Pupa - transformation needs patience, needs to be in the dark places of the cocoon until ready to make the transition into a chrysalis & finally into a butterfly. Going with nature - not against it. ③</p>
<p>Mercurius - The trickster spirit of Alchemy - most important aspect of transformation. Also feels like a metaphor for writing - paradox - also for menopause. ③</p>	<p>Prima Materia - The undifferentiated chaotic soup of potential within me, trying to take form, & being refined by the alchemical stages & processes. ③</p>	<p>Session ④ - Spirals - in nature & my life. Pre-menopause, I spiralled out into life / the world. As a menopausal woman, I am spiralling down, into myself. Involuntarily spiral rather than an evolving spiral. ④</p>	<p>Rumi. The cracks in the pavement are the places the light can shine. I am falling into the cracks, so that light can be there on the dark, forgotten places of my shadow. ④</p>	<p>Grieving - loss of my youth, loss of loved ones. Being dry & parched - feeling lifeless - a death again. The waters of tears which have a language of their own are needed to quench my thirst. ④</p>
<p>Fairy tale: 'If I was a fairy tale, what would it be? Or do I need to write / tell the tale of the menopausal woman?' ④</p>	<p>Sprouts - peeling back the layers of me, the defences, to find the precious seeds so they can sprout & grow strong. ④</p>	<p>Lighthouse - A beacon of light in the darkness. Journey to find my light house - metaphor for my inner territory. ④</p>	<p>Space</p>	<p>In mind Thoughts Body</p>

After having completed five pieces of experimental writing, my supervisor suggested that I spread them around me on the floor and see if there were three or four themes that had emerged, which I could then start to shape into different forms. I gathered the sheets and sat with them for a long time until the themes on this sheet arose (p. 99).

A Time to Retreat

Through the experimental writing phase of this research, I needed to incubate all that I was experiencing, away from other people's opinions or understanding of the menopause and experimental writing. For me, this period occurred when I found it increasingly difficult to give my full attention to my research at home. I had been immersed in my topic and produced some interesting experimental writing on the A3 sheets, but found I was wanting to control the process. I felt that nothing was happening for me on a creative level. I intuitively sensed I had to retreat from the every-day demands placed on me by work and loved ones. I decided to do a self-imposed retreat on my own, camping in private woodland owned by a close friend. This was a period of gestation, feeling myself to be held and contained in the womb of the woods. I wanted to connect with myself, in nature so that I could contemplate and reflect on my experimental writing sheets and my menopausal process.

I remember reading an article in the BACP counselling journal by Nick Totton about his therapy practice in wild spaces. He advocates the concept of "...moving into the outdoors from a 'base camp', which might be the therapy room or a literal camp in a relatively wild area; spending some time there, and then returning and integrating what has happened" (Totton, 2014, p.14). This article resonated with me and it felt important to be in a space where I could be open to what might transpire with no specific outcome in mind.

I have decided to illustrate my time in the woods through excerpts from my journal which appear as day to day accounts below. Whilst I have edited what is presented here, I have kept the form as I feel it gives an insight into the challenges I faced during this process.

Into the Woods



Day 1: Tuesday 8th August 2017

Just me, myself and I, some simple supplies: paper, journals, sketch pads, pens, paints, some reading on the method of writing as inquiry, and books on the creative process. Black ink in this section denotes reflection and purple ink the diary entries.

Can I cope with this simplified way of living for a week – completely at odds with the way my life usually is? Oh gosh! I am living in a Tipi – at last, a tent I can stand up in!



It took me two hours to get my first fire started, in order to boil a kettle to make tea. I had to forage for tiny twigs of dried birch, in different sizes, in order to provide the kindling needed to start the fire. The second fire I made this evening, only needed 1 firelighter to keep it going – perhaps tomorrow, I will need none.



I thought I would be bored at one stage today, but there is so much to do here:

Find the kindling to make the fire

Work hard to keep the fire going

Put on more wood

Shift seating so as not to get stinky eyes

Find dry wood

Chop and saw

Cook food

Wash up – for which I need to boil a kettle...

I am understanding that the whole of this week centres on the fire.

It has been raining on and off all day –heavily, and I’ve already had a dousing. A trial by water and fire – this is my welcome to the woods.

This afternoon, I sit with my pad of A4 paper and decide that in order to free myself of all the mind chatter that is going on about writing and producing something, I will get it out onto the page.

I am under the canopy of a small tarp, with a pad of paper, a pen and writing this evening and listening to the rain sing its song of welcome. Watching the fire as the flames leap and dance. I attempt to write. There is a block in me and I have the mental dialogue:

“Come on then, this is what you came here for”.

And then a small voice replied: “But I don’t know what to write”.

“Just do something.”

I feel pressure to perform – even out here where no-one can see me. Even on my own – perhaps especially on my own. I realise I always have this dilemma of not knowing what to do when I start to write. It is like a push and pull – a part of me pushes to create and another part of me sinks back in overwhelm. I reflect on how I constantly feel this tension with my experience of menopause: confusion and overwhelm at not understanding what is happening to me, causing retreat into depression; or following the threads of a quiet voice within to create myself anew.

Consequently, I do nothing except stare at the fire, feed the fire, converse with the fire – I obviously still need to use my voice! I am aware that I am blocking myself and hear myself say – “it’s okay, I just got here, tomorrow is another day and I am orienting myself – getting used to my new home”.

I am restless and annoyed with myself and the woods. My bones are aching from all the gathering of fire wood, sawing and splitting of logs. Only a few years ago, before I was peri-menopausal, I had so much energy – this would have been a breeze. I could have slept on a thin mat in a tent and my body would have been comfortable. Since peri-menopause, menopause and moving into post menopause, my poor old bones ache, so I have to have an air mattress and two foam mattress toppers on top of that, just to feel comfortable. I’m really angry at what menopause is changing in me.



I give up.

It is now 9pm and I am tired. I help myself to a gin and tonic (how hard it is to leave some aspects of civilisation behind), watch the fire, listen to the rain's song and realise (after having ranted on about menopause) that I feel the happiest I have felt for a long time.

I write:

Alone in woodland

Carpets of bracken surround me

Birch

Beech

Sweet Chestnut

Pine and Holly.

Day 2: Wednesday 9th August 2017

It is insistently raining today, making it difficult for me to find dry kindling. I rely on more fire lighters to start the process.

At 4pm the blue of the sky and the rainclouds make way for stormy weather. I am staring into my fire and listening to the rain. Something starts to form. The rain is a solutio – washing away that which needs to be removed.

I cried earlier, when I was writing about the conversation I had with my dear friend Sam. Great globs of hot tears – in gratitude to him allowing me to camp in the area of the woods that he

runs a men's group in. I have had difficult relationships with some of the men in my life. I consciously wanted to take this awareness into the woods and I feel welcomed by this area, lovingly tended by Sam's men's group. It seems an aspect of this menopausal transition for me is about a deepening understanding of my experience of my life – all that I have been through. This rain feels like an extension of my sorrowing and joy. Shall keep my notebook with me tonight, in case the muse of writing comes for a visit. I wonder if she is a gin and tonic lover, or perhaps a bacchanalian wine enthusiast?

Just before the rains came, I was sat having a cup of tea, watching the fire and noticed on one of the trunk stools in my circle, a beautiful green furry caterpillar. Moving around the circumference of the log, it looked to be having difficulty going over the side. It seemed distressed (must have fallen from a sweet chestnut branch just above the log) to me, going round and round in circles, so I intervened. I found a horse chestnut leaf and coaxed it on. I moved the caterpillar to a very nice log, laid on its side, just under the tree where I thought it had dropped from.

I wondered what kind of butterfly or moth that caterpillar will transform into – if it makes it through the portal of change. Just don't understand it really. The caterpillar feels like a symbol for me of my endless travelling of circling the text in my writing attempts, trying to find the place where the pen can settle on the paper so that I can do justice to my menopausal transition. Perhaps the caterpillar is a symbol of menopause for me. And, what will I become when I make it through the portal of my menopausal change of life?



It might have been a centipede...

This evening, I've made a fire between the bouts of rainfall.

[I notice there is a time between 6pm and 7pm where I have some anxiety – I don't know what to do with myself – it is as if I am waiting for something. I get restless and find it hard to sit still – is this that in between time? The time when something changes – when there is a possibility of something stirring which is unknown? Liminal space? Cracks in time? I remember the poem *Cracks in the Pavement* that appeared on A3 sheet number five.]

Day 3: Thursday 10th August 2017

I have done no creative writing today. I got an email from my supervisor yesterday asking me if I had anything to send him. Panic sets in.

I have been very busy today:

- Got up – had something to eat.
- Made fire to make tea – took a long time today.
- Went for a walk.
- Meg and Sam came to bring me some blankets and charge my phone.
- Sam cut me more wood. Whilst I can use the bow saw, I don't seem to have the power in me to use the axe.

By the time they left it was 2pm. I decided to make a big pot of stew/soup. By the time I peeled, chopped, got the fire going, cooked and fed the fire, it was 5pm! I am learning that time does not follow my rules in this place.

I am exhausted – had tea. Went for a walk and saw some lovely rabbits. Got the drum out but it is so flat it needs warming by the fire. Saw a beautiful silvery slow worm but wasn't quick enough to catch him on film. Or was it a she, or a hermaphrodite?

All these beautiful creatures make the child in me go bonkers with excitement – she is on a BIG ADVENTURE.

Also, today, little wrens came nearer my camp. I could actually see them. Usually I can hear but not see them, because the bracken is so high and they love being in the protected folds of this plant. Also the trees are profuse and it is hard to see these small gems. Also saw robins, heard crow speak and each night I sit by the fire entranced by the owls calling so near to me. I think they have accepted my presence here on their territory. **[Again I have this anxiety around 6pm for an hour – I don't know what to do and can't sit still – I keep moving from**

the chair – but all is done and I sense a stillness in the air – something waiting. I remember that I want to look at Mercurius, the trickster spirit of the alchemical process. It is an energy which will not allow anything to be stagnant or static, but demands movement. Instead, it seems like too much hard work to think about it. I feel under pressure and performance anxiety sets in]

It is Thursday today and Friday tomorrow. I am leaving on Sunday – it is too short a time – I wish I was here for longer. It is still Thursday! Will need to start fire soon, but first wine.

Day 4: Friday 11th August 2017

I don't seem to have done much today. Certainly no writing until right now (3pm).

I feel an anxiety building up inside me. I note that I have still not written about Mercurius and I know I want to but I am fearful of even putting pen to paper around this topic. I decide that the best way to deal with this is to do an A3 sheet of experimental writing around the topic of the spirit Mercurius (page 110). It takes around an hour.

[illegible]

At first, I see that I write definitions and what I have learned from books. This feels like my controlling mind trying to get everything into some kind of order because it fears something is dangerous and it wants to control the process. Something happens around 6pm – that in-between time – and I find that the sheet is filled with insights that I had not thought of – they just flowed out of me onto the paper. I set this A3 paper aside determined to look at it tomorrow and see what might emerge.

Day 5: Saturday 12th August 2017

Now it is 3.15pm – I started drawing a flower earlier – perhaps I might go back to it at some point. This is the whole process – I don't seem to be able to write on demand – it comes in fits and starts – when it/something in me is ready to be the receptacle to receive what wants to come. I am understanding that the writing writes me in its own good time. As the menopause moves me through different levels.

I find a broom in the lock-up and sweep the area clean. I do anything to stop myself engaging in the process of writing and reflecting on my transition. I decide to do a ceremony to help me to engage on a conscious level with my menopausal transition and to give thanks to the men's area in the woods where my camp is. I want to honour the men that come here in their men's group and to give gratitude to these beautiful woods and all the creatures that live here. I feel incredibly safe and accepted. This ceremony may assist and help me to be in the right receptive mood for my creativity and engagement with menopause to unfold.

The Ceremony

Some pictures of my ceremony and the objects intrinsic to it.





I use a fire brazier to put candles in. I make a circle of fruit, flowers, pieces of wood, and crystals that I have brought from home. I remember the impromptu journey I had on the Enchantress weekend where I met the woman who was performing a similar ceremony. I open my ceremony by inviting all the elements to be present and all the unseen life in the woods. I honour the people I know and my ancestors and bring to mind the men of the men's group and I honour the space they have created and thank them for letting me camp here. I ask for help

with gratitude in my heart in order to free myself up and remove the blocks to engaging with my menopause and to be able to write honestly about my process.

There is a palpable silence as I ask and am witnessed by the woods and its creatures. The wind stops, the rain stops – honestly, you could hear a pin drop. I am surrounded in silence and know in my heart that I have been heard.

I gratefully close the circle and thank all those unseen forces that were present.

I have a glass of wine to celebrate and feel a wonderful stillness in my body and mind.

I go to bed later, thinking “something has changed for me. I must look at that A3 piece on Mercurius tomorrow”.

Day 6: Sunday 13th August 2017

Had a blissful night’s sleep and I am sorry that this is my last day/night in these precious woods. I want to enjoy every last minute of my time here. I do what I normally do in the morning, make fire, food, tea, go for a walk etc. This afternoon, I sit and think that I must do some writing around the Spirit Mercurius – but it still seems too elusive. I get the A3 sheet out and I look at it for a while. A4 pad of paper and pen poised. Nothing happens.

So I decide, okay, perhaps I will write about something else instead and maybe that will free me up in some way to actually look at Mercurius. I’ll use my word box.

I shake the box wildly. Close my eyes and pick out a piece of folded paper. The words written on the paper make me feel giddy:

The spirit Mercurius

I cannot escape this elusive spirit so I sit down with paper and pen and wait for the words to pour out onto the page. Just as I am beginning to decide this is a futile exercise as there is no inspiration appearing, a huge emperor dragonfly comes into my camp. It circles me and then comes up to my face – goes back and circles my area again – and repeats this cycle for a good 15 minutes (I only know this because I glanced at the portable clock I have with me just before it appeared).

I then remember that in the Native American medicine cards (Sams and Carson, 1999), the Dragonfly symbolises Illusion. This word drops down into me and The Spirit Mercurius poem (p.115) started to emerge. I remember that one of the aspects of the spirit Mercurius is illusion.

Day 7: Monday 13th August 2017

Today is all about dismantling the camp and giving the space back to the woods. Being in gratitude through tears and longing to come back.

Reflection and presentation of poems that emerged in the Woods

The poems presented below illustrate and evidence that I am searching for understanding and a way to make meaning of my own process and the symbols that have emerged thus far. They illustrate the importance of searching experientially, and allowing myself to be fully engaged with my menopausal transition. Writing as inquiry facilitated this process and allowed me to reflect, contemplate and understand how my experience is transformative: both menopause and experimental writing are transmutive, moving from one inner state to another. They are both in the alchemical flask, being shaken, stirred, added to constantly. The spirit Mercurius will not allow a process to become static or stationary – this energy is constantly in motion and drives work on to grow, to move and to transform (Edinger, 1994). Menopause too will not allow me to stay the same, it challenges me to move, to grow, to transform (Kenton, 1998).

The first two days I spent in the woods on my enforced retreat, it rained solidly. All I had was a tarp to keep me, my fire and food sheltered. Whilst reflecting and contemplating on the alchemical journey of menopause, a space inside me opened out to the rain and the following emerged.

Rain Song

Deluge

Water ravishes me

With its cool, insistent touch,

Relieving the hot flushes

And fires of my transition.

Waters of life

Soak all the earth here.

Soon the bracken will be twice as high as me.

Water dripping and singing its song

I hear the choir's steady harmonics, drowning out
Other sounds in these woods
And then
The soloists appear

Droplets of arias entwined with the chorus
Pelting out deep bass notes
And
Shrill discordant sounds
And
The constant drumming of deep
Thumping, rhythmic globules on my tarp.

This is a Solutio
Which opens the Opus
A trial by water, after so much heat.
Menopause has been a
Fiery beast in me
And
Now these sacred waters
Offer cleansing and a dissolving into
My Self.

My whole life in the woods revolved around the fire – it could not be left unattended for a moment. It took me three days to be able to make the fire from scratch without using firelighters. I was completely mesmerised as the flames licked and danced with the kettle which promised to whistle and the following poem emerged.

Fire Dance

Flames caress wood

Penetrating

Demanding

Like a petulant child

Or a narcissistic personality.

Ravenous appetite must be fed

Demanding exclusive attention

Like a lover

Insistent

Insatiable

Devouring.

Held in the vessel of earth

Not tame, and yet

Warming cold toes and hands

Allowing a pot of wholesome food.

It mesmerises

Hypnotises

And fascinates

With licks of flames lapping at wood

Caressed by air

This is the fire of my menopausal transition

My burning flames

Lick my body

And burst out through sweat glands

Dripping with nectar

My passion ignites

And my anger delights me

This fire transforms

Purifies

And strips away the dead wood

Feasting on it

Until the ecstasy of transformation claims me.

Through the psychotherapy advanced training I have been enthralled and mesmerised by the concept of the Spirit Mercurius – essential for the alchemical Opus to take place (Edinger, 1994). Whilst in the woods, the words “The Spirit Mercurius” would come and I would record in my notebook that I would write about it later in the day, or the next day. It built itself into a crescendo and on my last afternoon, finally, the following came:

The Spirit Mercurius

Messenger of the Gods

Truth or lies?

Trickster

Meddler

Psychopomp

Disrupter

Agent of Chaos

Bringer of Disorder

So Many Names.

Wise

Knowing

Light

Initiator of Change

Transformer

Transmuter

Benevolent One.

Paradoxical Spirit

One moment you shower me with droplets

Watering the seeds in my heart

Urging me to grow

To Move

To Change

To Be

Feeding the fires in my menopausal belly.

The next

You drop the heavy weight of challenges, tasks and trials

And I am crushed again

Falling into uncertainty

Chaos

Delusion

Illusion

And

Pain.

You are the sacred spirit of my menopausal transition

Forcing me to dissolve

And water the earth

With each drop of moisture.

I am imprisoned in the alchemical flask

Until you transmute the poisoned waters I carry

Into the Aqua Vitae

Thus the waters of life

Can only be born through

The fires of my hot flushes

And the stoking of the embers in my belly.

Spirit of duality

You imbue the process of my writing

With chaotic expertise.

Writing messes with my mind

It is a dangerous liaison

Seductive

Intimate

It tantalises and invites me
To travel through uncharted territory
An embodied practice
Shaping and moulding my energy.

Mercurius
I claim you as the spirit of my writing
Which has a life of its own
I become the vessel
The womb space
Through which you transmute
Create
And
Grow patiently
All
In
Good
Time
The seeds of
Change.

The Sufi Alchemical Silent Retreat

28th September – 4th October 2017

Introduction

This retreat formed part of the advanced training in psychotherapy. It was a group retreat located in Cornwall, and guided by a Sufi guide in the Sufi Order (UK). This Order was founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan. The retreat focussed on various spiritual practices, such as breath work, chanting, meditation, contemplation, reflection and visualisations, to allow each individual to enter the space within themselves, away from everyday distractions. The retreat guided individuals in the group, through different psychological and spiritual stages (Hamilton, 2014; Inayat Khan, 2000). After the joy of being in the woods, the alchemical retreat process spiralled me deeper into my blocks around menopause, and facilitated a journey which started with resistance to my own unconscious material and brought me to a place of loving acceptance of menopause. Some of what I experienced is shared below.

New Beginnings

On the way to Paddington with my luggage this morning, I was worried commuters would be angry with me because I might be moving too slowly with my suitcase. It feels heavy and I'm aware it's not just clothing weighing me down. I've already had three hot flushes on the tube, and my anxiety of joining the group at the station is growing. The expansiveness of my time in the woods and the illumination that period provided has now evaporated as I come face to face with more inner work that is impossible for me to hide from. Menopause is truly a spiralling process for me.

On the train thoughts keep hammering at me: "Since menopause you've given up on your looks, you'll never attract a relationship because you're past it"; "A spiritual retreat? What do you think that's going to do for you? It's all nonsense you know, just pull yourself together and pretend to be into it". I have felt old and unattractive since peri-menopause, menopause and now post menopause (can't you tell I feel sorry for myself?) I take a deep breath. How good am I at pulling the wool over my own eyes? I understand that the coldness in my gut is fear about something I cannot control.

It was a long journey to Cornwall. I'm tired and feeling exhilarated at the same time by the natural beauty of this place, rain swept, windy, craggy and full of mystery. Truly wild country which resonates and calls to the unruly in me.

There's no messing about on this retreat. We arrived at 5pm, had dinner at 6pm and have our first session at 7pm this evening. Our guide (who is one of the facilitators of the advanced training) welcomes us and explains that the Sufi teachings are the path of the heart. A part of me melts at this and I feel vibrations around that area of my body. "Perhaps I will be okay here", I think, and fantasies of lovely hearts and flowers appear in my mind. This gives me a false sense of being able to control how I journey on this retreat.

It's 10pm and I am getting ready to sleep. We were asked to contemplate and reflect on the following three questions before we retire for the night. I've put my answers here in blue:

What brought me to the retreat?

My body wants this retreat. It is suffering from menopausal changes and needs help. My soul wants this retreat, my heart longs for this retreat and something beyond me calls (my eyes are welling up and I feel activity once again in my heart area).

Why now at this point in my life do I find myself in Cornwall on retreat?

My journey through menopause is changing me on a deep and fundamental level and I am in preparation – I need the support of this retreat to help me navigate my process.

What would I like to get out of this retreat for myself?

To understand the changing woman I am becoming through menopause and to find healing for my body, my broken heart, to surrender to my process and open to love again.

Uncomfortable Stirrings

It's 7am and each morning until we conclude the retreat, we perform purification practices outside in nature and then inside the group room. I look around at my fellow inmates and see that I'm not the only one who is obviously already stirred up and triggered by issues. Today's focus is on practices that connect us to the first plane of consciousness, the Earth plane, which is our material world. We are asked to contemplate our rich soil within, but in order for our garden to grow, the rocks must crumble. I realise I need to find a way to further release my fears around menopause. I need to trust my process through this rite of passage and learn to surrender to it fully and with joy. I've just had an insight: perhaps I am seeing menopause as an authority – I have always felt at the mercy of authority figures throughout my life. I am curious about this – I am starting to glimpse something important around my transition.

This afternoon, I notice I feel heavy and tired. I'm hungry and just want to go into hibernation. These are all aspects of the distortions of the Earth plane. Sitting in the group room we are taken into a practice of forgiveness and surrender. This evokes sadness and grief at all those people I feel I have wronged in my life, and those who I felt had wronged me. Menopause is included in this, because I was fine before it happened – wasn't I? I'm understanding that my menopause is challenging me to be conscious of past hurts and mistakes, and to let them go. I look around the room and am so grateful to be here with my group – even though we are in silence, we support each other through our glances and energy.

We were taken through a practice of divine compassion and mercy, which completely unravels me, producing hot tears, spilling onto the floor. We have left the Earth plane behind and now travel to the second plane of consciousness, the astral plane with the element of water. Our guide gently offers that water concerns our relationship to others, our thoughts, feelings, emotions and beliefs about them. I contemplate how, at times, I have not felt understood as a woman moving from youth to ageing in my culture. I am angry that I am guilty of wanting to control my natural transition through menopause, because it feels unsightly, ungainly and unwanted by others (as well as me). I resolve that I must start valuing myself and my transition from a heart space and not a mind place (oh dear, this feels rather like a Bridget Jones moment²...).

The place of the Broken Heart

Today we travelled through the third plane of consciousness, one where the mind does not rule. This plane is entered through beauty, art, music, etc. Today I have reflected on how my heart has been broken throughout my life and how I have contributed to the pain. Of course this isn't the first time I've been aware of my broken heart, but I feel now, today, I am capable of looking deeper into what it means for me. My hot flushes have stopped – I haven't had one since we got here. I am curious about that. This morning my body also felt good, like it belonged to me again. I feel strangely empowered and actually happy to be a woman with my body, and my looks. I love the silence and my critical mind is quiet. A weight has been lifted from me and I feel I am in alignment with the process.

We were taken into a beautiful visualisation, through the heart centre and into our secret garden. I entered an intimate space, filled with flowers, trees, animals, birds and a stream, so peaceful

² Bridget Jones, a character in Helen Fielding's novel 'Bridget Jones's Diary' (1996), who makes daily resolutions in a diary.

and light. We are told that here in our garden, we will meet our guide. I was in such a blissful state that I am not sure I saw anything. I think I had a fantasy of an old woman who looked a bit like British actress Diana Rigg, dressed in long black robes with a black headdress covering her head. We had a chat and I told her my fears around my menopause: that I was old and past it, no-one would ever find me attractive again, that my body was breaking down with illnesses such as the polycystic liver disease, and that half the time I felt I was living in a fog. She, the guide (if she was there) uttered those exasperating words: TRUST and SURRENDER. My mind comes in and tells me that the visualisation didn't work for me. How clever I am at covering myself with veils of unconsciousness.

This evening, we exited the third and entered the fourth plane of consciousness – the tension between conflict and wisdom. The element of fire related to Calcination in alchemy (purification by fire) is a key aspect of this plane and it is a dramatic way of purification. We are asked to contemplate distorted fire, such as rage and uncontrolled anger, and the positive aspects of fire, such as personal power. We are given different practices to connect with this fiery plane. I notice that I do not engage with these practices when I am not in the group. We are meant to practise them on our own in between sessions. Instead, I am outside, traipsing through the misty, damp, sunny at times and windswept terrain. This landscape feels like a metaphor for my menopausal transition.

Fire Rules

Through all the practices from yesterday and this morning, I am aware of unresolved inner anger. I am angry at being here; angry at not being able to speak; angry at not being able to run naked in this rugged landscape screaming at the top of my voice; angry that I have so many wobbly bits; angry at the guide; angry at the group; angry with anything that moves, except for the cat and the sheepdog I met this afternoon; and most of all, angry with MENOPAUSE. Bloody hell, I'm an angry menopausal woman! Ah, that feels better now I've got all of that off my chest. We move into the fifth plane of consciousness this afternoon, the plane of majesty and sovereignty. Apparently the colours associated with this plane are green and violet. As I sit in the group room, I realise that I have a green and violet top on.

One of the practices that I found challenging today was to use our voices to express out loud one of the names of the Divine. I couldn't enter into the spirit of this practice, because when each of us as individuals in the group sounded the name, I was reminded of a bunch of cats caterwauling so discordantly that it was painful for my ears. This afternoon, we left the fifth

plane and travelled to the sixth plane of consciousness. This plane is cold and beautiful – pristine and the air is rarefied here. It is a plane of solitude. It would be so easy for me to cut off and be in this plane, high above all the material, bodily, messiness of the Earth plane. I am spacy, as if floating like a feather gently in the breeze. I even think about menopause and what a gentle transition it could be, if only I allow myself, like that feather to surrender to its embrace.

Guidance

Today, we come back down to earth gently, and out of silence. It took me a long while to be able to feel ready to use my voice and talk to the other members of my group. After a while, I felt grounded and happy. It was a joyful reunion to be able to share our experiences of the retreat. I realised how much the presence of the other members of the group helped me. I felt held and supported by them, even though we did not communicate with sound. I also felt that I was not experiencing my own issues alone but in communion with others. This was an incredibly powerful retreat for me. I understood the value of nurturing myself in this way. Menopause was calling for me to surrender and trust the process and that is exactly what I had to do on this retreat. I travelled through hidden landscapes of my own terrain. My mind could not make sense of the process I went through, but my heart opened and menopause was able to enter there.

Chapter Six: The Opus is Complete

Introduction

This final chapter concludes the research journey I have undertaken in my personal search for meaning through menopause. Having discovered that viewing my transition from a purely physical and medicalised western route had not aided my understanding of the transition, I ventured on a psychological and spiritual quest to elicit meaning for what I was experiencing (Kenton, 1998). Here I discuss, in light of empirical observation and through the theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and elsewhere in the dissertation, my own learning and the important themes which have arisen through the research process and my own transition. I offer critical reflections on the methodological approaches I utilised, scrutinising their strengths and weaknesses through my engagement with them. Finally I discuss the addition to knowledge that this piece of research makes; its potential usefulness to other women who may be moved to seek different ways of connecting with this important stage in their lives; the importance of how other cultures view women at mid-life and the possible impact this may have on western cultural views of menopause; and the potential this work has to aid psychotherapeutic understanding of menopause both from a therapist and client perspective.

Emergence of Key Themes

This thematic discussion centres on the major themes which emerged through the intense phase of personal research I underwent during different spiritual retreats, an impromptu retreat into the woods and experimental writing practices that generated material I used to make sense of my menopausal process. These themes represent aspects of my journey to individuation (Storr, 1999) and were instrumental in bringing integration and personal growth through my transition. It is challenging to present the themes below in a cut and dried manner, because I see them as being strands that weave together to create a whole tapestry of the transition for me. Having said that, I offer a precis below of what emerged.

Negative Self-identity

Traversing menopause brought personal issues to the fore, centred on my identity as a changing woman (Daniels, 1993). Through the conversation with a nurse in the Prologue and my own questing through the research, I realised that I had introjected negative images of myself as a woman at this important time of my life (Chrisler, 2011). These ranged from issues with my

ageing body, other people's assumptions of me as a menopausal woman, feeling unsupported and misunderstood through the transition, to feeling disconnected and split psychologically and physically. I felt powerless and ashamed at being menopausal, wanting to hide any physical signs of the transition (Olchowska-Kotala, 2017). My experience through the research process is confirmed by the research undertaken by both Chrisler (2013; 2011; 2007) and Olchowska-Kotala (2017) who make the important point that this transition can often plunge women into having negative views of themselves, particularly with regards to low self-esteem and harmful body image issues. I resonate with Chrisler (2013) who believes that many people of both sexes introject negative views towards menstruation and menopause through popular culture and that this distortion can affect broader opinions concerning women in general. I concur with the work of Herzig (2015) and Nosek et al. (2012) who maintain that if menopause is branded as a medical problem, without considering the emotional and psychological issues that may be present, women will feel this change of life as a negative factor in their lives. Chrisler (2013) echoes this concern and it was certainly a driving factor for me in starting this research and consequently my journey through the mire of negative issues that I felt about myself embarking on the transition.

The Shadow (Unconscious Issues)

Throughout the personal research, I was challenged to face my fears and confront my unconscious psychological shadow material that had not been fully integrated (Avis Wake, 2003). I understood how overwhelming this time of life can be for some women, with the myriad emotions and feelings which arise as a result of the changes taking place through menopause. I had to confront my own sinking depression, my teenage anger and a constant struggle with my defence mechanisms (Evans, 2008) which were desperate to control the transition. The work of Avis Wake (2003) assisted me to make sense of what I was experiencing and she notes that menopause can be a harbinger of a life crisis event. I realise that through the research, I was being challenged to come to terms with my fears around what I had perceived to be the masculine, controlling authority I had lived with throughout my life, projected onto most authority figures I had encountered. As can be seen in chapter 1, I entered this EdD through the experience of a crisis of illness with regard to my liver cysts. This precipitated the onset of the menopausal transition for me. I had to learn to recalibrate myself so that I could turn the negative emotions and life crisis which I was experiencing (through illness and psychological problems) into opportunities for growth (McQuaide, 1998). Sharan (1994) explains that some women find menopause brings past issues to the surface that have

not been integrated. She asserts that menopause is a deep cleansing procedure and if it is successfully engaged with, brings opportunities to fulfil our potential and in so doing facilitate others' passage through their own psychological and emotional issues. This understanding aided my engagement in the research process and this was echoed by the voice of menopause in Chapter 4 which urged me to engage consciously in this great transition and to welcome every aspect of my shadow material with grace.

Loss and Grief

I notice that much of the time, from the beginning of my journey, and through all the retreats, as well as the advanced training in psychotherapy, grief and loss walked by my side throughout the process (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). The grieving process I entered into often unnerved me with overwhelming feelings, emotions and body sensations (Kenton, 1998). My experience through this study confirms Keeran's (2006) research which looked at the individuation process of women who were going through the menopausal transition. She found that one of the key themes in her research was women's struggle to accept and integrate their feelings of loss and grief as they were moving through the change of life. My process also resonates with the work of Howell (2001). She discovered that the menopausal women she studied all named grieving loss as a key aspect of their menopausal passage. She observed that the women's grief became the catalyst for them all to seek to undertake their own personal journeys of self-exploration, just as I had in this research. Each retreat facilitated me to consciously engage at deeper levels with my menopausal transition and surrender to loss. I experienced much grief around losing my parents and my earthly family as well as my youth and looks. I understood through the dialogue in Chapter 4 that the inner voice of the menopausal transition stressed the importance of mourning in an honourable way, to accept my feelings and surrender control.

Healing power of different cultural perspectives

It was a revelation for me to understand that my physical symptoms such as hot flushes, are viewed in certain traditions such as the Hindu culture, as a wonderful indication of a spiritual process (Fogel, 1998; Tiwari, 2011). Being offered this view on my hot flushes, has been empowering for me and I started to welcome them (as echoed in the voice of the Menopausal Transition in Chapter 4). I resonate with Fogel's (1998) view that this physical symptom is a sign of creative energy. To be able to enter into retreats and the advanced training in psychotherapy, enabled me to be exposed to different ways of viewing my transition from other cultural perspectives. Being offered different ways of viewing and navigating my menopausal

journey through these different lenses, brought me into conscious engagement with the transition and enabled me to cultivate my own personal power, rather than feel at the mercy of the change (Boice, 2007; Northrup, 2012; Shinoda Bolen, 2014). This has brought a deep healing and integration of positive attitudes to my menopausal transition, echoed by the observations of Boice (2007), who asserts that in other cultures such as Japanese, Mayan and indigenous communities, the menopausal woman is a respected and honoured member of her community. Having completed my research, I feel different in myself; I respect and honour myself and the menopausal transition. Shinoda Bolen (2014) emphasises that in Native American traditions, menstruation and menopause are signs of blood mysteries. She notes that in these traditions, during menopause, women retain their menstrual blood, not to produce babies, but to grow wisdom. Through my journey, I deeply resonate with Shindoa Bolen's understanding: I have come to understand that the meaning of my menopausal journey has been to claim my personal power and accept my own wisdom, born through all of my experiences.

Radical self-care

The issue of self-care arose from the moment I started the research period and continues on. As a menopausal woman, I have discovered through my experience the utter importance of tending to my own needs first in order to be able to attend more appropriately to other people's needs. This has been a crucial theme and learning point which has peppered the research process. Through all the retreats there was a clear challenge and message for me to learn what self-care and nurturing meant and to put these qualities into action in my own life. The work of King et al. (2005), emphasised the importance of self-care for me and they believe it is vital for menopausal women to learn this art. They also observe that one of the ways for women to engage in self-care and nurture is to attend to their spiritual needs, as there is research which links spirituality as a way to cultivate positive emotions (McCullough & Tsang, 2003 in King et al. 2005). Steffen's (2011) research on spirituality and menopausal symptoms concurs with King et al.'s findings and I certainly found this to be true during my research process: once I was able to surrender to the menopausal process and actively, consciously engage in the retreats, my spiritual life became a major source of nurture for me.

Importance of symbols and archetypes

My phenomenological engagement with the powerful symbols and imagery that emerged on these retreats and the advanced training were transformative for me. Dreams showed me that

I was traversing certain alchemical processes (Edinger, 1994): for example, the dismemberment, shamanic death dream in Chapter 5, which demonstrated that I was undergoing the trial by water in the stage of negredo, where my fixed, inflexible, critical, self-talk and despondency about my changing body was causing emotional turbulence. My unconscious was giving me symbols of beliefs and restrictions around my menopausal transition that were ready for me to slowly dissolve on a conscious level (Hamilton, 2014). I resonate with the work of Pinkola Estes (2008) who believes that menopause is a time when potent archetypal energies arise in menopausal women. These energies assist us on the journey to integration through the powerful symbols which arise through engagement with them and this has been my experience. The woman I encountered in the cave performing the ritual and ceremony of cycles in Chapter 4, felt like a wise woman archetype, showing me a different way to connect with myself and my transition. The Spirit Mercurius who appeared in Chapter 5 was the trickster archetype that I encountered, who challenged me to expand and grow through menopause and this research. Ammitzbøll (1990) maintains that it is important for women journeying through menopause to take note of dreams, which are a symbolic language of the psyche and creative pursuits where symbols might also arise, as these provide a deeper understanding of the change of life. This has certainly been true in my research. I am reminded of the dragonfly that appeared in Chapter 5 which in the Native American Tradition it is a symbol of illusion (Sams & Carson, 1999), one of the attributes of the Spirit Mercurius and heralding this archetype's presence for me.

Celebration, ritual and ceremony – a rite of passage

It was intriguing for me to understand that my menopause was a rite of passage, which was made very clear to me during an impromptu spontaneous image in Chapter 4 of a woman performing a ritual in a cave, at the beginning of the Enchantress retreat. It was through ritual and ceremony on every retreat, that I really understood and found meaning through conscious engagement with menopause as a rite. This accords with Baker's (2013) view that menopause is an important rite of passage in a woman's life. The importance of ritual and ceremony to mark key transitions in a woman's life has been a vital learning for me through this research (Evans, 2008). Herzig (2012) urges that menopause be seen as a rite of passage which is welcomed and celebrated as a natural cycle in female life. My ceremony in the woods in Chapter 5 was my way of acknowledging this important event for myself. Ammitzbøll (1990) asks women to use ritual and ceremony as ways of integrating material which the menopause can bring. My experience also resonates and accords with research carried out by Fogel (1998)

and Evans (2008). Both researchers see the menopausal transition as a rite of passage and emphasise the importance of celebrating it. This attitude also runs through the work of Boice (2007) who talks about other cultures celebrating this great change of life. Orleane (2010) says that in our western culture, the menopause is not honoured or celebrated and she believes that it is important to celebrate it in a ritual way, in order to bring consciousness to it and honour the process. I was moved to do this during my time in the woods (chapter 5) and I felt that the ritual was re-making and re-forming me into a powerful menopausal woman.

Surrendering control

This was the most difficult aspect of the whole of my research journey – surrendering control and being open to what might arise. The challenges I faced on each retreat, to be conscious and in touch with my own inner spiritual life, naturally brought my defence mechanisms strongly to the fore (Shinoda Bolen, 2015). I tried not to engage in much of the work (detailed in chapters 4 and 5); I would split off and occupy a mind-stance the moment my defences recognised something that might trigger an emotional response in me. I was often in a state of fear that I would not survive or be able to control what was happening to me. This fear of letting go often surfaced in the writing as well as the transition: I wanted to know what I was producing, before it was generated. I wanted to control writing and menopause so that I could have a handle on them both and not be at their mercy. The biggest lessons I learnt through the retreats was that I had to learn to trust and surrender and to be open to what might emerge. I resonate strongly with Shinoda Bolen's (2015) understanding that it is crucial at menopause for women to engage consciously with the archetypes that may be present. By doing this, we are able to navigate menopause and be aware of our fears and defence mechanisms.

Importance of groups

Being in groups with other women who were often traversing the same transition as me, as well as my advanced psychotherapy training group, was immensely powerful and healing. It was through these groups that I found the courage to share my process and to find support for the eclectic waves of emotions I was experiencing through my transition. This accords with McQuaide's (1998) view that for menopausal women, being in groups facilitates them going through the transition to construct images of themselves which are diverse and held. The groups I was part of enabled me to find my voice again and to not be afraid to talk about menopause which I often felt from some I encountered in my everyday life. The genuine smiles I received from all the women in the shamanic retreat groups as well as all those in my advanced

training group, showing their delight at my humble attempts to share my research, will never be forgotten. Once again, my experience accords with McQuaide's findings that women at midlife who join groups with others going through the transition, find courage and strength by being able to reveal their narratives and be heard. My own confidence in my abilities to research this topic and share it grew in these groups: all were interested to know more about my work and some expressed interest in reading my dissertation (which will be sent out at completion of the EdD). Finding my voice and it being heard was empowering for me and enabled me to part the veils of silence around my personal transition. This accords with Herzig's (2012) view that it is crucial for menopausal women to be able to voice their experiences and feelings to others. As a member of the advanced training in psychotherapy group, I was able to feel supported through the research and writing of this dissertation. I was gently held, listened to and aided in understanding the experiences and dreams that emerged through this process.

Critical Reflections on the Methodological Approaches

Autoethnography – a Vehicle for Embodied Experience

Utilising autoethnography enabled my deep absorption and immersion into the research. The freedom to write experimentally allowed me to permeate the information I received and also generated the material that emerged, so that I became that which was being researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). Through the weaving of an autoethnography, I became the focus upon which the fabric of experience revolved, flowed and deviated. The process brought forth a deep, critical, analytic mode, steeped in self- reflection of my experience of self and relationship to others and my wider cultural community (Spry, 2001). Like Tillman-Healy (1960 in Sparkes, 2002), the autoethnographic unveiling of my menopausal experience was an attempt to convey to the reader what it can feel like to live with this complex change of life that I and some other women find challenging. As a transpersonal counsellor and psychotherapist, I concur with Jane Speedy's assertion that autoethnography has a major impact on power relationships when conducted by therapists (Speedy, 2008). She notes that research in the field has focussed primarily on client material and until relatively recently, has not acknowledged therapists' lives as being worthy of investigation. She argues that this could give the impression of therapists being those who are completely healed on all levels with no issues, thus setting them above their clients. This view places the practitioner in a power position and could be seen as preying on vulnerable clients who are troubled by their issues. This is not a balance of power,

personally, socially or politically. As the reader will note through my personal research, I am as vulnerable regarding my own personal material as other women going through menopause may be. Speedy (2008) maintains that autoethnographic writing in research is a way to balance the therapeutic relationship and that researchers' stories and life journeys are as valid as client material in understanding the issues that present in therapy. My reason for embarking on this research was to be able to offer my own clients who were experiencing difficulties regarding their transition on a psychological level, expanded ways of connecting consciously with menopause in order to aid them to find understanding and meaning for themselves in their journeys through this immense rite of passage.

Ellis (2004) makes the point that autoethnography and therapy share common themes: both disciplines require a willingness to move beyond the mundane; each call for an ability to reflect, inquire, develop qualities such as courage and insightfulness, as well as a willingness to acknowledge feelings. I believe that transpersonal counselling and psychotherapy and the methodology of autoethnography are a harmonious way to examine client and personal material in the context of inner world experience, relationships with others and the wider cultural perspectives that impact on clients and therapists in a multicultural society.

I discovered that autoethnography is a reflexive way for the exploration of my personal material in this research (Etherington, 2004) and it is reflexivity which enabled my personal engagement with the material that emerged on a multitude of levels. As Etherington notes, reflexivity in research is tantamount to ensuring that critical self-reflection of the impact of researchers' social and cultural backgrounds affect that which is being researched. As the sole researcher in this project, I had to be constantly aware through the process of reflexivity, of the dynamics inherent within the research and all those involved. It heralded a period of on-going self-awareness in relation to my research on all levels (Finlay & Gouch, 2003).

In Chapter 5, the autoethnographic genre was used in a particular way, to allow the emergence of personal, internal voices (Stone & Stone, 2011). I listened, through my autoethnography, to the voices on the margins of my psyche. A healing experience emerged through the writing process of engaging with my own damaged wounded female, distorted critical voices, and the wise part of me. This highly reflexive way of using autoethnography enabled the writing of my self-story and exploration of personal experiences, by allowing the silenced voices to communicate with each other (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). I feel that this is an intensely important tool for therapy, because if the therapist allows these silent voices within themselves,

perhaps they are then able to witness clients' marginalised and dominant voices. Dialogue may then occur, leading to creative solutions transpiring in therapy (Rowan, 2005).

Autoethnography – Difficulties Encountered

Just as the Spirit Mercurius does not allow for inertia or stagnation (von Franz, 1998) writing autoethnography proved to be a complex and difficult undertaking for me. I resonate with Speedy's (2008) comment that "Auto-ethnography seems something of a slippery customer" (p.155). Often I was unable to stand back from the work and view it objectively. It seemed to have a mind of its own and resisted being tamed or controlled, which at times I tried to do and realised it was an impossible task. It was only through the assistance of both my supervisors who aided me to hone my personal narratives that I was able to surrender fully into the process of its creation. Throughout the emergence of my personal work, I often had to reflect on the charges levelled against the methodology: the issue of solipsism, taking care to steer my work away from being self-centred or selfish (Etherington, 2004); the issue of self-indulgence, where it was important for me to exert common sense over what I was writing in order to prevent it from becoming self-gratification; and the issue of boundaries, whilst attempting to honour my own research process and the way that I portrayed others in my autoethnography (Ellis, 2004).

The lack of boundaries inherent in this methodology was a major concern for me (Reed-Danahay, 1997). I often found myself in a stressful state, wondering whether I had shared too much, too little, been too trusting, or too transparent – in essence, just like Psyche in the myth of Eros & Psyche (Neumann, 2016), I kept asking myself if I and my personal material were too much. The polar opposite position I also found myself in was questioning whether I had done enough, represented my process enough, made it good enough, leading to the deeper question "was I good enough" – a classic issue that many clients bring to the therapeutic space (Jacobs, 2004). Indeed creating the autoethnography was at times, like being in therapy in the dual role of client and therapist (Roth, 2009). Autoethnography pushed my boundaries and asked me to lay aspects of myself open for scrutiny. The methodology paralleled my menopausal process which urged me to go beyond the boundary of seeing my change of life just in terms of the western medical model (Mackie, 1997).

I worried that readers might find my autoethnography to be alienating to them because they may not have had similar experiences to me, or may not even have had any experience of menopause. The tension of using autoethnography to narrate my story of the menopausal transition asked a great deal of faith and trust from me in order to hold these tensions and be

able to find value for myself in what I was experiencing and writing. In my profession the issue of boundaries is paramount in order to assist the client to feel safe and secure within the therapeutic container (Jacobs, 2004). Writing this autoethnography lifted me out of a boundaried container and into a world of liminality, into the spaces between where often there was no clarity, a questioning and wondering place which was highly messy and not formed but blurred (Speedy, 2008). I found this to be at times a difficult space to acknowledge and occupy which had me veering between my insecurities and the emergence of my creativity. I have walked a fine line in the writing of my autoethnography, between what I have chosen to share and what I have chosen to withhold in the spirit of service to the research. I agree with Sparkes (2002) who observes that writing autoethnography challenges silent authorship and texts where the author's subjective voice is absent. It has been important for me to part the veils of silence and challenge the silencing of the menopausal transition in my culture – as such autoethnography offered me the perfect vehicle.

Perhaps the biggest challenge I have faced in writing autoethnography, is whether the texts I have produced are of a decent standard and how this standard will be judged by the reader. I have offered what I believe to be heart-felt renderings of my personal journey through the transition of menopause. Whilst as a psychotherapist I often use creativity in my work, I am most certainly not a literary writer, poet, or someone who engages in creative writing. This is my shortfall as a writer and I am completely mindful that those who read my work may see no benefit in the poems or narratives presented in it, because they might not adhere to literary standards. The writing emerged from me through the spirit of my own surrendering to the process and a further discussion is offered in the next section.

Writing as Inquiry - Unexpected Connections

Engaging with writing and its importance as a way to explore and give birth to my experience of menopause was, I discovered, crucial to my quest for meaning through this transition. In fact, I travelled through a parallel process; I found that the method of writing as inquiry and menopause as a personal inner process go hand-in-hand. They were intrinsically connected in their refusal to be controlled or constrained by me. Neither followed a linear stage process – my movement through menopause and experimental writing was constantly in a state of flux and flow, meandering through different stages of my experience (Goldberg, 2005). Through my menopausal transition and using writing as inquiry, I had to surrender to the rhythm of my change and subsequently, to the act of writing. I realised that writing and menopause are

embodied experiences for me. Ursula L. Guin (2004) notes that “Prose and poetry – all art, music, dance – rise from and move with the profound rhythms of our body, our being, and the body and being of the world” (p.281). Writing poetry allowed expression and exploration of my process without censorship. It provided a means by which I could relinquish control and bypass my intellectual mind, in order to give expression to what was emerging and offered opportunities for me to move through my resistance of connecting with menopause. I noticed that as I travelled through my menopausal and writing process, I was unable to stay static or stable in any one aspect of it. I had truly become a nomad who travels through different landscapes, dimensions and imaginative spaces, and my process refused to be constrained by my conditioned ideas of what my journey in these spaces should be. The inspiration of becoming a nomad through my research and experimental writing was drawn from St. Pierre (1997), who says:

Nomads deterritorialize space that has been territorialized, chartered, ordered, and then shut down. Nomads search for mobile arrangements of space where thought can settle for a time and then multiply and recombine, always displacing the sedentary and unified (p.412).

In my nomadic wanderings through the process of experimental writing embedded in writing as inquiry as a method of research, I was being taught new ways of understanding menopause and the process that I engaged in. It is the writing I have done, (using Cixous (2004) as my exemplar) in my journals and on the A3 sheets which gave me an outlet and a way to understand and engage consciously with my transition. I was on an intensely personal journey which did not follow another’s path through this monumental change in my life. Just like a nomad who does not settle in one place for long, I was constantly journeying and sense that neither my writing nor my menopausal change of life were or are formed – they (and I) are always in a process of becoming.

One can follow many prescribed ways and programmes to facilitate writing and the production of texts (Goldberg, 2005). The same can be said of menopause – one can engage with the medical route to work through menopause (Mackie, 1997), or take an alternative approach (Shinoda Bolen, 2002). My research process was unique to me and I was searching and foraging for meaning and understanding of my process. This parallel process that writing as inquiry evoked in me, I see as a valuable strength of this method of research.

Entering into this experiment of using writing as inquiry as a research method to see what would emerge on the page, demonstrated to me that writing becomes the instrument and method in its own right (Speedy, 2008). Richardson (2005) asserts that this method makes explicit the course our research takes and what our process is that leads up to our representations of texts, because we are exposed and there is no place to hide. Writing as inquiry has opened me up in ways that I was not always consciously aware of. I became vulnerable as the process unfolded and resonate with what Behar (1996) says, that “To write vulnerably is to open Pandora’s Box. Who can say what will come flying out?” (p.19) Through this alchemical process which the method immersed me in, I have found transformation in myself through the texts which emerged and an understanding of its importance in research as a method to uncover and strip back the layers until the alchemical gold is found.

In this research, the method has allowed me to understand myself and engage with my creation on deep levels. My work feels clear and transparent. In it I document an embodied encounter and through poetic form, perhaps my journey has brought some flavour to the reader of my experiential process. The analysis of the text, is a continual dance of reflection and questioning about my development and experience with this method, and so the work does not stand alone as a piece of sociological writing, but adds to the ongoing dialogue of menopause in my culture.

Writing as Inquiry – a challenging engagement

For Schwalbe (1995), creative offerings such as poetry are not concerned with the process of writing and he sees it as a limiting way of communication with the audience. In fact, Schwalbe maintains that poetry is an exclusionary medium and that not everyone can understand it. I am interested in this line of argument, as I too used to share Schwalbe’s opinion that poetry can only be understood by a minority who could excavate its meanings. It is only through using writing as inquiry and sharing my work in progress with my supervisors, colleagues and friends that I realised it is the constraints of my conditioning that had made poetry feel like it was an exclusive club. Writing as inquiry has allowed me to flee from such a constrained construct, into a line of flight and brought freedom to my expression. In Schwalbe’s (1995) opinion, poetry is more limiting than prose in that it has a restricted code with its frame of reference being hidden and therefore not transparent. Through my process and reflection on the methodology, I have discovered that poetic writing is an embodied form of communication and that my mental mind does not always understand it, but I feel it and it evokes an emotional response in me. Therefore, perhaps it cannot be read like prose, which is possibly why

Richardson and others evolved different ways of evaluating creative research reporting (Richardson, 2005).

As Richardson (1996) maintains, in her response to Schwalbe's criticisms of her chapter on writing as a method of inquiry,

...writing is a process of discovery. My purpose is not to turn us into poets, novelists or dramatists – few of us will write well enough to succeed in those competitive fields ... Rather, my intention is to encourage individuals to accept and nurture their own voices (p.521).

Because of its unboundaried nature, I found it difficult at times to halt the process of writing. It often ran away with me and wanted to spiral out of control. The methodology demanded I give the process time and space which often proved difficult as I was unable to know how much time it might need in order to allow production of texts. There were instances when an insight would arise, but there was no time to write it down because I was interrupted. Unfortunately I didn't always remember the insight that had flown. The experimental writing produced reams upon reams of text, and thus a laborious journey of revision, editing and refinement. Indeed, even now, at the end of this dissertation, I look back on all I have written and re-presented and still feel the urge to tamper and change it. So it is a methodology that definitely wants to spiral and not be constrained by formats. I have also found that the form that texts emerged in would at times bring my vulnerability to the fore. And yet, to be true to the research and material that emerged, it was important that this be transparent in my textual offerings.

Formal Retreats, Spontaneous Retreat

Retreats – an opportunity for growth

It is difficult to analyse the retreats on the basis of strengths and weaknesses. The retreat processes are based on alternative cultural views that emphasise the importance of spiritual perspectives, and offer a particular way of journeying through certain themes. The strengths or weaknesses completely depend on the individual's encounter with these ways. For me, they provided focus and space for engagement on a deeper level with my own journey through menopause.

It is impossible for me to split the spiritual from the psychological or even the physical as through this research, I have understood that all these are intertwined and complementary to

each other: to concentrate on one, is to send out a clarion call to the others (Inayat Khan, 2000). This is what I have understood through my quest for meaning through the menopause. I underwent a number of spiritual retreats, which highlighted all my imperfections and vulnerabilities, yet brought ways of transformation on a holistic level. By my conscious engagement with menopause through these ways, I was able to allow the qualities of compassion, empathy and love for myself to emerge. Part of the retreat process is to relinquish everyday life, in order to be with oneself consciously and fully (Hamilton, 2014). Being able to do focussed spiritual retreats enabled safe exploration of the inner landscape on deep levels. Through these retreats I understood the importance for me of undertaking spiritual practices, even if only for five minutes a day to instil regularity, consistency and a deepening connection to myself, which has brought me more balance and consciousness (King et al. 2005).

Each of these retreats and the advanced training showed me the importance of archetypes and the alchemical process of transformation which I was engaged in (Edinger, 1994; Hamilton, 2014). Travelling through various alchemical stages and operations provided me with a lens through which I was able to chart and understand my inner process of menopause through these different ways (Hamilton, 2014). This model of transformation provided containment for understanding and meaning making of my process to become conscious of my inner chaos during menopause and led to my connection at deeper levels with the transition.

All of the retreats built in time in nature as part of the curriculum. I also took a solitary retreat into woodland (Chapter 5) and found the importance of being in nature in the natural flow of life through the elements and wild woods, mirrored the wildness of the menopause transition for me. Being with the elements of rain, fire, wind and earth, completely felt natural and right. Through the time I spent in woodland I could see my anger and its volatility reflected in the fires I had to make; I saw my tears flow and the grief I was holding in the rain that poured. The wind blew away debris from my inner self and created room for me to breathe deeply and rise up to see the bigger picture of my transition and the earth just held and cradled me, offering sustenance and nurture.

Retreats - challenges of engagement

The challenges I discovered in attending the formal retreats were the same for all three: to be able to surrender and trust the process. The retreats mirrored my inner journey with my menopausal transition and I was forced to confront aspects of my shadow material that I was loath to engage with (Shinoda Bolen, 2007). It demanded much for me to be able to withdraw

from my everyday life and the quality of courage to be open to what might emerge was needed for all the retreats. Any issues that I encountered during the retreat processes were my own individual issues that I was being urged to transform and integrate. I needed to be open to different spiritual practices and in a place of acceptance rather than questioning their viability or power. I understand now that the retreat process is demanding, at times isolating, complex and completely transformational. During all the formal retreats, I felt vulnerable and experienced some psychological pain, as I struggled to let go of the control I tried to exert on my menopausal process.

Reflections on the research process.

Entering into the research, travelling the disparate strands that at first seemed to be alien from each other, I slowly found the threads all linked to form a beautiful pattern of my menopausal transition. The most important lessons I have learned through this research experience, have been to surrender and let go of trying to control my journey through this rite of passage. It is the psychological and spiritual work through the various retreats and the advanced training in psychotherapy that have been truly transformational for me; these ways have enabled me to come into a conscious, loving, compassionate and empathic relationship with the wounded woman inside me, going through her menopause and coming to a place of individuation (Bond, 2010; Edinger, 1994).

The act of writing started a process of healing from the negative issues I associated with the menopause and it also gave me a way to reflect on the changes that were happening for me (Goldberg, 2005). Writing enabled me to find the confidence within myself to ‘speak’ my truth about my process (Herzig, 2012). It has given me a means to voice what comes from my own authentic personal power. At times it became a spiritual act of meditation and I would be in an altered state of consciousness (Proff, 1980). This was when the poetic re-presentations of my experiences in this dissertation emerged. I found that I was engaged in a parallel process between writing and menopause.

Another learning about my menopausal transition through this research, is that menopause is not about me giving up, or becoming a crone. I won’t be a crone until I am at least in my 80’s – if I get there. Actually, as a menopausal woman, I am coming fully out into the world, the more my inner world strengthens, the more I am able to be in the outer world, to be able to offer and share the fruits of my life experiences. Doing this research and writing this

dissertation is a testament to that – I have a long way to go before I can claim the title “Crone”. I resonate with Matthews (2007) who says:

I personally don't feel I have become a crone – that will happen when my bits start to drop off. There is a phase between mother and crone that happens when we become the protectors, actively involved in our community – guides of the tribe perhaps. I'm not ready for the rocking chair yet by a long chalk! While I have my own teeth, I intend to bite life's crust with relish (in Boice, 2007, p.268)

I have discovered that rituals and ceremonies such as the one I did in the woods and on some of the retreats have had a profound effect on my psychological health and connected me to a source of spiritual nourishment. Being in tune with the rhythms of nature and the seasons, and reclaiming Autumn as the time of the menopausal woman, with the energetic archetype of the Enchantress has been an important learning for me (Davis & Leonard, 2012; Duckett, 2010). Consciousness around this, I suggest is vital. If we as menopausal women are in tune with our bodies, minds, spirits and connected to the rest of nature then the rhythms we all undergo can give us vital information on how to navigate this transition.

I derived so much understanding about myself and my process through menopause and how much I have hidden the powerlessness I have felt for so many years. I came away from each retreat feeling completely embodied and sensing great strength in my vulnerability. I fully understand and support that some women choose and need to have medical support in order to help them navigate their menopause. What I am suggesting is a marriage between the traditional ways of supporting this change of life and alternative ways such as those that I embarked on through my research. I am proposing a coniunctio which joins together the body, soul, mind and spirit, which are not separate but interconnected. A whole-istic way of engaging with menopause, not just a linear symptom-based approach (Hamilton, 2014; Edinger, 1994).

Working in groups has had an immensely healing effect on me. As has tending to my own self-care and realising the need to retreat into woodland on my own (Chapter 5) in order to reflect and contemplate my process.

Limitations of the study

The obvious limitation of this study is that it is one woman's story of her journey searching for meaning through menopause. However, I understand that the menopausal transition is a highly individual and personal journey and therefore to negate one woman's experience, is to once

again bring down the veils that silence the transition. I agree with McLeod (2013) who feels that personal research is relevant as it can hone into universal themes, and offer different perspectives. After all, where would depth psychology and psychotherapy be without the intense personal work Jung engaged in, documenting his emotional and psychological turbulence in service to his art (Shamdasani, 2009)? Having said that, it would be fruitful to have researched using co-participants to understand and witness their experience of menopause and also those that are close to them. In a way, I feel those that are not engaged in the transition, but live closely with someone who is, are also silenced and not heard.

It would also be fruitful to carry out research which focusses on women who go through an early menopause, or an induced menopause because of illness (Sievert, 2006). Unlike my transition, this is not a natural passage for them and I wonder how they might be aided to engage with early menopause in a healthy psychological way.

Addition to knowledge

The research explored in this dissertation has the potential to contribute to the work already available on the menopausal transition and to be a support to other counsellors, psychotherapists and health workers who come into contact with menopausal women. It has the ability to enhance the current medical model (discussed in Chapter 1) which views menopause as a deficiency disease (Mackie, 1997), by highlighting the importance of attending to menopausal women's psychological and emotional health in the following ways:

- Women need to be seen in a holistic way and their individual narratives of menopause must be welcomed as these can provide clues as to what may be needed to support them through the transition;
- Educating health practitioners and women who are going through menopause to be open to therapeutic ways of dealing with their psychological and emotional issues that may arise, rather than just relying on medication to alleviate symptoms such as depression or anxiety;
- The medical model at this time does include CBT, but this is not often offered to menopausal women and it is short term work – between 5 – 20 sessions. CBT is not suitable for everybody and I believe that my work asks health practitioners and menopausal women to consider other forms of counselling and therapy which may take a more creative approach to healing;

- My research highlights the importance of groups for menopausal women to share their experiences in and I consider that these could be set up within catchment areas around the country. A low cost group would open up support to those women who cannot afford private therapy. I note that Dr. Melanie Davis from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in a television news interview stated that: “Because of the stigma attached to menopause a lot of women feel they can’t talk about it. There is a lot of strength in talking to other women and discovering one is not alone” (ITN, 2018).
- More information in the form of leaflets could be made available to women, not just through the internet but at their GP surgeries outlining the physical, emotional and psychological issues that can arise through menopause, giving contact details for groups already set up in their areas and different support options for women. Perhaps the leaflets could suggest creative practices that women can engage in, such as keeping a writing journal in order to support themselves.
- My work also could potentially enhance the medical model by highlighting the importance of cultural differences and backgrounds of menopausal women and that it is important to challenge the narrative which stigmatises menopause in some cultures such as my British culture by affirming that women at this time in their lives are important members of their communities and are acknowledged as such.

This research was done in the spirit of adding to the debate on menopause and I believe that it is crucial for physicians to be educated about the psychological and emotional aspects of the transition and the complexities of this very individual rite of passage for women. As a psychotherapist I believe that this piece of personal research has equipped me to understand on deeper levels the importance of the spiritual and psychological needs of myself and clients going through the transition. This research is an offering to my colleagues and may provide a different lens through which to view and engage with menopause.

I believe my research gives some understanding of the complexities of the change of life some women experience. I also feel that menopause is a rite of passage and a journey of individuation which leads to integration, wellbeing and wholeness. It can often be experienced as a life crisis for those of us who suffer through it and in transpersonal psychotherapy, life crisis is seen as an opportunity for growth (Hamilton, 2014).

Final thoughts and next steps.

Having just finished the writing of this dissertation, I turn on the ITV national news (13th August 2018 at 13.30). There is a feature on difficulties that the menopause brings for some women, leading to complex mental health issues. One woman interviewed had tried to commit suicide. The newscaster describes that the emotional and psychological needs of women are not attended to at this time of their lives; that 1 in 4 women report emotional psychological difficulties; 1 in 10 consider giving up their work; and professionals say that menopause is a contributing factor for suicide rates of women being higher in their fifties. I am aware that for the subject to be part of national television news, this is clearly a transition which is affecting society. This affirms the importance of my study, and all those researchers who have gone before me and studied this complex and intricate transition. It bears witness to the fact that emotional and psychological needs of women going through menopause must be attended to, so that the veils of silence can be parted.

My hope is that through this research I can open my work to a wider audience, perhaps by creating a group space for menopausal women to come together to share their experiences. I also envisage basing a book around my research, aimed at women and those close to them, so that my work contributes to information, education and support being available on this complex topic.

Epilogue

Menopause Speaks

Grief is a complex and intricate process unique to each person. It can be a difficult transition in your culture, where you are expected to have a short period of mourning before you go back to work and your day-to-day concerns. It is not often heard and witnessed in its entirety, but controlled in societies. But grief must be heard, seen and witnessed. Surrendering to grief brings healing.

Remember the shock you received when you went to stay with the Kalash people in North West Pakistan in 2004? You were 44 years of age and on the cusp of your transition into my mysteries. Do you remember the morning you arrived in the fertile valley below Chitral, the Kalash women invited you to a sacred ritual? One of their matriarchs had just died and it is the job of the women of the Kalash tribal communities to perform the funerary rites. All the people from the surrounding valleys came to where you were, to honour, celebrate and grieve this woman's passing from this plane of existence.

Her body was laid out and lovingly cleansed (you had never touched a dead body before), and caressed by the women. The men of the community were outside the sacred tent, cooking the food to be shared as a communion after the women had finished the sacred rites for their departed sister.

They cried, they beat their breasts, they wailed, they ululated, they expressed. And so did you as if this woman was your dearest one, gone forever.

You have done the same through your menopausal transition. You have lovingly laid out and cleansed your inner vulnerabilities and caressed them with compassion. You have truly grieved the passing of one stage of your life and are now celebrating my golden transition. You are always in a state of being and becoming.

You are at the end yet only just beginning and this Opus is complete.

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Appendix

GSoE RESEARCH ETHICS FORM

It is important for members of the Graduate School of Education, as a community of researchers, to consider the ethical issues that arise, or may arise, in any research they propose to conduct. Increasingly, we are also accountable to external bodies to demonstrate that research proposals have had a degree of scrutiny. *This form must therefore be completed for each piece of research carried out by members of the School, both staff and students*

The GSoE's process is designed to be supportive and educative. If you are preparing to submit a research proposal, you need to do the following:

- 1. Arrange a meeting with a fellow researcher**
The purpose of the meeting is to discuss ethical aspects of your proposed research, so you need to meet with someone with relevant research experience. A list of prompts for your discussion is given below. Not all these headings will be relevant for any particular proposal.
- 2. Complete the form on the back of this sheet**
The form is designed to act as a record of your discussion and any decisions you make.
- 3. Upload a copy of this form and any other documents (e.g. information sheets, consent forms) to the online ethics tool**
at: <https://dbms.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/red/ethics-online-tool/applications>.
Please note: Following the upload you will need to answer ALL the questions on the ethics online survey and submit for approval by your supervisor (see the flowchart and user guides on the GSoE Ethics Homepage).

If you have any questions or queries, please contact the ethics co-ordinators at: gsoe-ethics@bristol.ac.uk

Please ensure that you allow time before any submission deadlines to complete this process.

Prompts for discussion

You are invited to consider the issues highlighted below and note any decisions made. You may wish to refer to relevant published ethical guidelines to prepare for your meeting. See <http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/research/networks/ethicscommittee/links/> for links to several such sets of guidelines.

1. Researcher access/ exit
2. Information given to participants
3. Participants right of withdrawal
4. Informed consent
5. Complaints procedure
6. Safety and well-being of participants/ researchers
7. Anonymity/ confidentiality
8. Data collection
9. Data analysis
10. Data storage
11. Data Protection Act
12. Feedback
13. Responsibilities to colleagues/ academic community
14. Reporting of research

Be aware that ethical responsibility continues throughout the research process. If further issues arise as your research progresses, it may be appropriate to cycle again through the above process.

Name(s): Rashon Chowdhury (rc13598)

Proposed research project: Personal Research on the Menopausal Transition: “Parting the veils of silence: a woman’s search for meaning through the life transition of menopause”.

Proposed funder(s): None

Discussant for the ethics meeting: Not from the University as I do not know any students there (I am doing my EdD remotely from London). I have discussed ethical issues of personal research with a peer from the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education where I am a member of the training staff in London.

Name of supervisor: Sheila Trahar

Has your supervisor seen this submitted draft of your ethics application? Yes

Please include an outline of the project or append a short (1 page) summary:

An EdD dissertation, which explores my personal engagement and process through my menopausal transition from a psychological and spiritual perspective. The work explores the impact that menopause has on me and chronicles my journey in creative ways. As a psychotherapist, female clients come to me to explore their own menopause and to understand it. The purpose of this research, through my deep engagement with the topic is that it may assist others and myself to make sense of it for ourselves. The dissertation will give a comprehensive discussion of my approach to the research and includes: a literature review of the topic of menopause and key concepts around the spiritual aspects of the alternative ways I engage with my research; an examination of the methods for collecting my personal material through the research (alchemical spiritual groups/retreats and shamanic retreats); and the methodologies of autoethnography and writing as a method of inquiry which I utilise to aid me to find creative ways of expressing my menopausal change. The

reasons I chose to collect personal material for my journey through the menopausal transition and the reasons for the choices I made are discussed. There is an in-depth exploration of the advanced psychotherapy training I have been undertaking through this research process. This training is in Jungian alchemy and the spiritual work of the mystical practices of Islam, known as Sufism, culminating in two spiritual retreats. The two shamanic retreats I engaged in are also fully discussed. I will present re-presentations of creative work that has arisen through my deeper engagement with the topic of menopause. These will look at what I discover through the research by engaging in the different retreats and Jungian alchemical training. Conclusions discussed in relation to my journeying and the creative writing that emerged, including reflections on my engagement with the research process. There is a discussion concerning contributions that this study makes to the growing literature and information on the menopausal transition, and the implications of my research, final thoughts and next steps.

Ethical issues discussed and decisions taken (see list of prompts overleaf):

As a practitioner and researcher, I strive to adhere to the ethical standards of the BACP, the BPS and the UKCP (Bond, 2014; Ethics Committee of the British Psychological Society, 2009; UKCP, 2009). John McLeod (2015) argues that the principles for ethical research and counselling are the same: beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, fidelity. Whilst awareness of our ethical responsibility is crucial, it is, he states, impossible to design neutrally ethical research (McLeod). Nevertheless, when writing about others as I do, there is an ethical and moral responsibility to try to prevent serious harm (Sikes, 2012). Hammersley and Traianou (2012) point out that the weighing-up of ethical considerations is complex and impossible to formulate: harm caused by qualitative research can be difficult to predict due to its open-ended, exploratory nature. Furthermore, it can be of different degrees and types and may be offset with benefits. Whilst doing no harm is a laudable ideal, it would make much research impossible (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Carolyn Ellis (2007) agrees that there can be no one set of rules governing the ethics of qualitative research. She emphasises the importance of being mindful of the greater good and undertaking considerable reflection alone and with others (Ellis).

As Ellis (2007) states, revelation of the self always involves revelation of others, so that "...we constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling" (p.26). I am aware that in exploring my menopausal transition, I will be in groups with other women, who, by their presence, will have an impact on my own personal journey (McLeod, 2015). With reflexive consideration of my needs and theirs (as far as I can perceive them), and of the nature of our relationship, I will be open and honest with those I encounter and explain the research I am doing. I engage in deep reflexivity throughout my research, from initial engagement to the writing up process, concerning the ethics of referring to others in honourable ways (Ellis; Etherington, 2004; McLeod; Sikes, 2012). I consider how they (and I) might be perceived by others reading my research and how they, and I, might react to that (Ellis, 2007). I have discussed this with others – my supervisor and a trusted peer who is a member of staff at the psychotherapy training centre I work at (the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education, in London), as is suggested by McLeod (2015). I was aware that we have control of the portrayal of others when we include them in our story and that "...the life as told is not, and never can be, the life as lived" (Sikes, 2012, p.9). Inevitably, this carries ethical responsibility.

My own position and subjectivity as researcher cannot be overstated. I engage in my research in order to uncover understanding and meaning through my menopausal transition. It is imperative to say that my research is solely based on my experience.

Although my research had no participants, I am aware that I still have an ethic of care to those referenced – e.g. the nurse who appears in my prologue (McLeod, 2015). I try to protect their anonymity as best I can – those who appear in my research are not named, or are assigned a pseudonym. I take practical measures to keep my material secure by using an encrypted password and a locked bureau. I endeavoured to hold others in conscious compassion in daily meditation. I am aware that I have an ethic of care to myself and, by extension, to my clients and family (McLeod, 2015).

Etherington (2004) describes how subjective research into personal experience has been criticised for being self-indulgent. Yet, the relevance of personal research, which can tap into universal themes, is well documented (Etherington, McLeod, 2015). Etherington suggests that self-exposure is valid when “...it leads us to somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to” (citing Behar, p31). For me, the focus on my own experience, the inclusion of other women I encounter through this research (who I have been transparent with) and the preservation of my freedom to express means that I give myself permission to access my inner authentic voice. Ellis (2007) reminds us of Primo Levi’s claim that our personal stories need to be told in order to free us. The honouring of my expression through my menopausal journey in the research has the potential to liberate me from the weight of wounding by bringing me greater self-knowledge. Overall, I feel that the personal benefits of my research experience, which I hope will spread beyond my own life, may outweigh the discomfort, which is a factor to be taken into account when reflecting on ethics (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Hartley, 2001).

Compassion to all sentient beings, a Buddhist precept, is one that I strive to live by. In allowing my own unique expression, I am able to extend compassion to myself too. Reflexivity is key in my research so that the quality of compassion, to myself and others, can emerge.

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If you feel you need to discuss any issue further, or to highlight difficulties, please contact the GSoE's ethics co-ordinators who will suggest possible ways forward.

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